

Student Experiences of Full-Time Education Courses in Higher Education: An Empirical and Theoretical Investigation

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of students whilst studying within higher education. Changes within the higher education system in areas such as educational provision and the student population itself have resulted in higher education being central to much theoretical debate.

This study adopted three research methods to enable an exploration of the main themes. These three research methods were:

- Questionnaire survey of 194 first and second year Education students.
- Four focus group interviews of final year Education students.
- Nine individual access route interviews (Thombs, 1997) with final year Education students.

All of the student participants were studying at one particular university and on one of four courses within Education, these being: B.Ed Primary; B.Ed Secondary; BA Secondary; Combined Studies in Education.

The study developed a theoretical model that represented the decision-making processes of students both prior to and within higher education. The theoretical framework recognised the relationship between macro (society), meso (institutional), and micro (individual) factors, and attempted to develop the agency-structure debate.

The research found age and associated responsibilities to have a significant influence on students' choices and decision-making processes whilst in higher education. Cultural capital and social capital were found to be influential on pre-university perceptions, choices, and experiences, influencing the likelihood of continuing education. Changes in the student population were evident in relation to the students' characteristics and backgrounds, access routes followed into higher education, and experiences of higher education. These findings highlighted that the student population are not a homogeneous group and thus questions the term 'traditional' student.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter provides an introduction to the thesis as well as an overview of the study structure.

### **1.1 Research Objectives of the Thesis**

This thesis, in many ways, is a logical follow-on study from Thombs (1997) who researched the different routes into higher education at the same university as this study was based. Consequently, this study developed around three main objectives.

1. To research the variety of students experiences in higher education, in relation to students' social and structural positions.
2. To identify, document and research the decision-making processes and the patterns and variety of coping strategies, colonisation activities. In the process of navigating their way through the academic and relevant non-academic aspects of the university.
3. To contribute to existing theoretical frameworks and understandings of students' experiences and decision-making processes whilst studying within higher education.

This research seeks to provide a valuable insight into, and a theoretical understanding of, students' experiences as they navigate their way through higher education.

### **1.2 Background to the Study**

A study carried out by Dr Bill Thombs (1997) into the access routes and experiences of students prior to entering higher education analysed factors such as social class, gender, age, and work experience, and how these factors affected and structured students' routes into higher education as well as their attitudes and behaviours towards higher education. Three main entry routes with variations, making nine different access routes into higher education in total, were identified. The three main routes were traditional, vocational, and Access (see page 37 below). Following on, the access routes identified by Thombs (1997) have been used within this study to support a continuation of the research focus on student experiences, perspectives and

actions. Whilst Thombs (1997) concentrated on experiences and perspectives prior to university, this research project concentrates on experiences and perspectives of students within the university. The sample frame (students following undergraduate programmes within the School of Education) remained the same as Thombs (1997), though the students/subjects in this study were later cohorts (see chapter 5).

### **1.3 Changes In The Student Population**

Changes within higher education in terms of educational provision and structure, and changes within the student population are all factors that are affecting what it means to be 'a student'. The experiences of students both prior to and during higher education are heterogeneous, and are no longer as predictable and pre-determined as before. The term 'student' in the 1960's previously implied certain characteristics and life-styles and the membership of a particular culture. The student body, however, now consists of individuals in greater numbers from a wide variety of backgrounds, from different social class groups, ages, access routes, gender roles and identities, and ethnic groups (Silver & Silver, 1997). The once traditional identity of a student in higher education (18 year olds with A levels) exists for only a proportion of the student population and, therefore, no longer represents the totality of the student population. This suggests that an awareness of how students experience higher education and how they navigate their way through the educational system needs to be developed. This research, therefore, aims to understand what it is to be a student within higher education, and how the system of higher education caters for a diverse range of experiences for each student.

Much previous research in the area of students within higher education has focused on the academic aspects of studying. This research, however, will explore the wider picture and examine the non-academic as well as the academic aspects of being a student within higher education. In order to understand student experiences of higher education, it is vital to examine other areas of students' lives, and how social and personal roles other than students' roles as learners, occupy their time and influence their choices. This research aims to create an understanding into "the realities of student experience in all their roles in a higher education context" (Haselgrove, 1994, p.7).



Student characteristics and backgrounds and the impact these can have on the students' experiences of higher education are discussed in chapter 3.

#### **1.4 Learning in Higher Education**

The educational and academic aspects of student life are discussed in chapter 4. The wider societal demand for more employable graduates (Holmes, 1995) has led to changes within the structure of higher education and the courses it provides. Students are now more likely to leave university with the expectation to prove themselves and succeed in the world of work. They are 'products' of higher education and no longer such a scarce resource being more able to choose their employment.

As the learning process in many higher education institutions too has changed, this research seeks to understand the impact of modular programmes of study on the student experience within higher education. In recent years, an increase in modular programmes of study has developed a system in which students can make choices (to some degree) as to what they learn and how they learn. Students for example, can select modules that interest them personally, but also modules which they consider will be most beneficial to their future career path alongside modules that use particular methods of teaching and learning. Students are able within limits to choose which modules and sessions to attend and to 'navigate' their way through a particular course. It can be argued that, though there are advantages to modular programmes such as developing choice, flexibility, and increasing student control over their studies, modularity also imposes some negative consequences on the students (MacWhannell, 1994). Extra workloads, more examinations at the end of each semester, more stress on resources, and variations in academic support as a result of the new methods of studying are all possible negative effects. It is important for universities to reflect on themselves and learn about how it can best conduct the teaching-learning experience. This study, therefore, consequently provides a more in-depth understanding of the impact of modularity on students' experiences of learning.

Wider macro changes due to Government policy will also be examined in relation to their impact on the student. Changes in funding have led to the student grant being frozen at the 1990 level, and then taken away with universities now partly dependent

also on student fees. These changes have placed more of the costs onto the student or their families. More students pay for their own education and may feel unable to risk bearing the costs higher education can incur.

Changes in financial provision have influenced students' choices of where to live whilst studying. The additional cost involved of moving away from home to study is an influential factor on students' choices of where to study. An increasing number of students are choosing or having to study at their local institution and remain living either in their own home or their parental or other family members home. This has implications on the experiences of students and questions the traditional image of what it is to be a student, which is that of moving away from home and participating in the academic and non-academic aspects of student life.

The main areas of concern, therefore, discussed in the literature review (chapters 3 and 4) are: social class; age and access route; gender; ethnic origin; educational experiences and perceptions (learning styles and modularity); finance; accommodation; social aspects and involvement. These areas are examined in relation to their importance and interest to the research objectives and the aims of the research project.

### **1.5 Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) developed and applied in this research seeks to inter-relate students backgrounds and characteristics with their experiences within and of higher education (see diagram 2.1). On entering higher education students' are faced with a variety of options and thus have choices to make. In order to make choices, students, with varying degrees of awareness, have to go through a process of decision-making, where they have to consider not only their academic roles as learners but also other social, and personal roles and obligations. It is argued that the choices students make result in them adopting a mix of coping strategies and colonisation activities. Students' face many issues that can alter their chosen study paths. This may result in students having to renegotiate decisions previously made. This research thus examines the experiences of students in relation to their processes



of decision-making, on what basis students' make choices, and how they 'navigate' their way through higher education.

## **1.6 Methodological Structure of the Study**

The methodology used for the research is discussed in chapter 5. The empirical study was carried out through four phases.

Phase 1: An induction into the existing work of the project to date, including secondary analysis of existing data (Thombs, 1997) and bibliographic updating so as to ensure a firm base for future development.

Phase 2: The development and implementation of a questionnaire that provided quantitative data that supplemented and extended quantitative data currently available to the project.

Phase 3: The utilisation of a series of focus groups that provided qualitative data from samples of representative students in relation to their decision-making processes within the university in areas such as; their expectations of higher education; programme of study and module choices; preferred learning experiences and support; and wider personal/ contextual factors such as financial and accommodation issues insofar as they affect the higher education experience. Students were selected in relation to their access routes into higher education to ensure that views were discussed with a representative sample of student 'types' (age; course; gender; ethnic origin).

Phase 4: Semi-focused interview schedules designed to obtain personal ethnographic biographical data from representative student 'access types' (Thombs, 1997) about key decision points, influential factors on their higher education experience and their personal perspectives of higher education. Each interview focused on the experiences and the decision-making processes of specific individual student access 'types', the reasons for the 'path' of modules they followed, and their educational experiences in higher education.

The subsequent chapters (Chapters 6-11) discuss the data obtained in relation to the main themes of the research highlighted in chapters 3 and 4. Finally, the conclusions and main findings (Chapter 12) of the research are discussed within the theoretical framework of the study.

## Chapter 2: The Theoretical Framework of the Research

In order to understand the experiences and pathways of students on courses in higher education it has been necessary to develop and substantiate a theoretical framework through which the research can be structured and analysed. This analysis too needs to be located within the context of previous and current changes within the higher education system. It is generally accepted that higher education now promotes a more diverse range of educational opportunities and encompasses a more diverse student population, thereby widening student situations and experiences. As Silver and Silver (1997) state,

“What it means to be a student is itself not what it was a quarter of a century, or a decade ago” (p.13).

Students’ experiences in higher education may be affected to various degrees by ‘external’ and / or ‘internal’ factors. External factors refer to wider changes within higher education such as the growth in modular degree courses, the increased variety of assessment procedures, and a more extensive choice of study methods and learning approaches. Internal factors refer to personal issues such as family responsibilities, the responsibility students have to take in relation to their time management, and financial situations that may affect the experiences of particular student ‘types’. These changes make higher education an area of considerable research interest even though, as Barnett (1996) argues,

“The external and the internal worlds are separate in several senses. The first world is epistemological, economic and policy-driven in character; the second is private, personal and psychological” (p.79).

Though internal worlds may be psychological, it does not mean that they are random and idiosyncratic. Indeed, this thesis assumes the opposite. That is, internal worlds are relatively coherent and structured.

The central aim of this research is to examine, understand and theorise the experiences of students’ particularly how they ‘navigate’ their way through higher education. In doing this, use is made of a number of key concepts that are subsequently integrated into a conceptual schema as evidenced in diagram 2.1 below. The applicability of different concepts of capital – cultural, social, human, financial, relational – are

considered before choice theory, and the experiences and perceptions of actions as coping or colonisation strategies are examined for their utility in understanding the dilemmas and issues facing students ‘navigating’ their way through higher education. Diagram 2.1 attempts to portray the relationships and interactions between the different concepts and the social realities they represent.

In this research, students enter higher education from a variety of social structural positions, and thus have a range of personal ‘baggage’ - particular life histories and experiences, life styles and commitments - which impact upon the decision-making processes throughout their time at university. It is these ‘choices’ students make and their experiences, both internal and external to the institution of higher education, which is of particular interest. At the same time, whilst the experiences and decision-making processes of students in higher education are central to this research, it is important to place these experiences within a wider social context and to understand how the wider social structure (macro) may affect students’ experiences of higher education. There are thus different levels of analysis.

## 2.1 Levels of Analysis

Changes within the higher education system, including those made as a result of policy changes made by the Government, have led to changes within higher education institutions including course provision and methods of learning. Changes too have occurred within the student population itself such as an increase in what has been called ‘non-traditional’ participants. Ball (1994) argues that these wider policy and institutional changes have first and second order effects.

“First order effects are changes in practice or structure, and second order effects refer are the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity and social justice” (p.25-26).

First order effects thus are the changes in national policy in relation to higher education and are vital to this research project. Changes within higher education policy have implications for the experiences of students and create second order effects, resulting in (amongst other things) how students become ‘colonisers’ and/or ‘copers’ during their studies at university (Moreland, Thombs, and Birley, 1995). Silver and Silver (1997) argued that students’ experiences too are subject to



influences of an external and internal nature, those being the expectations of the university, and what they expect from themselves respectively. The diverse personal and educational roles of students within higher education result in them having to make decisions relating to not only the demands of the institution in which they study but also in relation to their personal everyday lives. Silver and Silver (1997) note that,

“These are sociological and economic factors, but they are also historical, determined by the interaction of institutional and personal histories” (Silver and Silver, 1997, p.14).

Silver and Silver (1997) underplayed, however, the importance of the wider social structure on not only institutional policy but most importantly on the students’ personal lives, expectations and everyday situations. It is important to adopt a research perspective which not only examines the students and their experiences but also the contextual factors which affect, and have an influence on, their institutional interactions and experiences, incorporating both the micro-processes (face-to-face interaction) with the meso-level (institutional) and macro-level (wider social structural) processes. “The result has to be a multidimensional and multilevel, social theory” (Zafirovski, 1999, p.510), combining agency and structure.

“Such social theory assumes not only the ‘duality of structure’... in relation to agency, viewing the former as constraining and enabling of the latter. It also assumes the duality or rather complexity of agency versus structure, by viewing the first as both constructing and deconstructing, both ‘condemned to freedom’ and to dependence in relation to the second” (Zafirovski, 1999, p.511).

This form of analysis will enable an insight into not only the decision making processes and experiences of students but also the impact changes within higher education policy have on students’ ‘choices’ and decision making processes. As Cook (1990) argues,

“To deal adequately with the link between actors and structures the first requirement is a theoretical framework which incorporates both concepts” (p.113).

Cook (1990) suggests that few theorists incorporate both the actors (micro) and the structures (macro) due to three main reasons. Firstly, those theorists who focus on structural processes tend to ignore social psychological processes. Secondly, too many sociologists tend to focus more on demographics such as gender, age, and social class and ignore the impact of other social structures. Thirdly, Cook (1990) suggests that it has been difficult in past years to ‘bridge the gap’ between the wider

society and the individual actor through the use of theory. Sharp and Green (1976) too, argued some time ago that social researchers needed to,

“look behind the level of immediacy in order to try to develop some sociology of situations, their underlying structure and the interconnections and the constraints and contingencies they impose” (p.25).

Taking into consideration Cook’s (1990) three points, this research attempts to ‘bridge the gap’. The research attempts this by not only examining demographics such as gender, class, and race, but also by examining the influence of wider social structures and individuals ‘careers’ and the impact these have on individual ‘choices’ and decision-making processes of individual students. Blaxter et al (1997) used and defined the term ‘career’ as a combination of paid and unpaid work “as well as overall life choices and circumstances” (p.139). They argued that,

“each adults’ career can be seen to involve a number of possible roles -employee, partner, parent, voluntary worker, learner, and so on - at different times and in varying combinations” (p.139).

By addressing these factors, a theoretical framework has been developed to ‘explain’ the decision-making processes of students in higher education and “the essential connectedness of structure and action” (Layder, 1995, p.132). Educational research has to recognise not only the diversity within the student experience but also the diversity within the student population itself and that student ‘choices’ and decisions are not homogeneous and are perhaps less predictable. It is important to recognise the impact of individuality on students’ experiences and choices within higher education, though it is important also to recognise the impact of social processes that may exist through contextual factors such as those of ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ capital.

## **2.2 Constitutive Types of Capital**

As we have already indicated, a theoretical framework seeking to understand student decision-making and choices must take into account structural factors, many of which are experienced by students as ‘givens’ (e.g. family responsibilities) as well as the flow of situations, contexts and experiential constraints.



“It is necessary to situate the individual in a social context, to be able to say something about that context in terms of its internal structure and dynamics, the opportunities it makes available and the constraints it imposes, and at the same time to grasp that essential individuality and uniqueness of man that evades any total categorisation” (Sharp and Green, 1976, p.17).

The concept of capital itself refers to some artefact or aspect of life that is ‘owned’ by a person and related social groups in such a way that it is available for them to utilise in living out their everyday lives. Economists refer to the different factors of production (e.g. land and labour) as well as the capital that is represented by a range of phenomena such as buildings, raw materials and managerial ‘know-how’ as well as stocks and shares and ‘money in the bank’. In many authors (e.g. Marx, 1851) there is a distinction made between productive capital (capital used to produce goods or services) and consumption capital, which refers to the material possessions that people accumulate in order to live their lives and prepare for the next day. In social science, this distinction between productive and consumptive capital is normally conflated. Whilst (for instance) cultural capital is amassed by an individual through socialisation and other patterns of interaction, cultural capital is also a resource that a person and/or social group can call upon and use in their economic and social structural activities (Avis, 1981; 2000). Cultural capital is thus both consumptive and productive.

In this research, distinctions are made between different sorts of capital that arise from, and are deployed in, social life, though it is clear that these categories are not totally mutually exclusive (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000). These different types are:

- Cultural capital;
- Social or relational/familial capital;
- Human capital; and
- Financial capital.

Each needs to be briefly dealt with in turn by referring to authors considered appropriate in the context of this thesis.

Bourdieu (1993) refers to ‘cultural capital’ as the relationship between the individual and ‘cultural transmission’, of how individuals from different socio-economic groups gain, or do not gain, ‘capital’ concerned with values, beliefs and behaviour that can be

beneficial to them in living their lives. Bourdieu (1993) argued that individuals from the dominated classes are eliminated from the more prestigious occupations as they do not possess or gain the 'cultural capital' required to gain admission or succeed there.

Bourdieu (1993) used the term 'habitus' as a technical term to represent the concept of cultural capital. An individual's ideas and beliefs, though subjective, are influenced by the objective world and the social and cultural networks in which the individual lives. As Nash (1999) comments,

"Habitus is conceived as a generative schema in which the forms of elemental social structures come, through the process of socialisation, to be embodied in individuals, with the result that people necessarily act in such a way that the underlying structures are reproduced and given effect" (Nash, 1999, p.177).

Reay, David and Ball (2001) provide a definition of habitus.

"Habitus can be viewed as a complex internalised core from which everyday experiences emanate. It is the source of day to day practices. Habitus produces action, but because it confines possibilities to those feasible for the social groups the individual belongs to, much of the time those actions tend to be reproductive rather than transformative. Dispositions inevitably reflect the social context in which they are required" (p.2).

In cultural terms, therefore, habitus refers to the attitudes, values and beliefs that an individual holds as a consequence of their social structural and institutional positions and related experiences, and the commonsensical (Gramsci, 1971) interactions that occur with their environment and other people. Meso institutions in order to work, and accomplish their tasks for which they are established, too develop their own norms, values and ways of behaving. In the light of this institutional construction of routines and norms, the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1993) too can be related to institutions such as schools, colleges of further education, and institutions of higher education. Institutional habitus (Reay, 2001) refers to the organisational cultures of educational institutions and how they as organisations are linked to wider socio-economic cultures. This includes curricular structures, educational advice and guidance, and also the influence of teachers and peers.

Nash (1990) however, criticised Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus' and argued that it "allows no recognition of self, or choice or action" (p.434). Instead 'habitus' focuses,



“almost exclusively on how the taken for granted practice of socialised individuals is effective in realising the strategic ends of their cultural group” (Nash, 1990, p.434).

This research recognises the importance of Bourdieu’s theory of ‘habitus’ and ‘cultural capital’ though it also accepts the argument put forward by Nash (1990). There is a need to explore variations of individuality and to not presume or expect all individuals from the same social or cultural background to follow the same life and educational paths. Part of the explanation for this divergence is the meso- or institutional context. That is, the institutions in which people inhabit or even different parts of the same institution (including universities) can be perceived and experienced differently in terms of their imperatives, behavioural costs of membership, and thus opportunities and constraints.

Habitus can be extended and used also to define the impact of family relationships upon student life and activities, though here that particular usage is better described as social capital. Social capital relates to family backgrounds, perceptions, and expectations. The views and expectations of families have a degree of influence on the opportunities perceived and thus the choices and decision-making processes of individuals. Social capital within the family can be present through both financial capital and human capital. Financial capital refers to the family’s wealth, income and disposable assets. This can affect the resources available to aid achievement such as a place and materials to study at home. Human capital is normally taken to refer to the set of skills, learning and other attributes that arise from educational achievement. For many students, human capital commonly refers to the educational achievements of their parents or other significant others in such a way as to affect and aid cognitive development. Coleman (1988), for example, argues that, “children are strongly affected by the human capital possessed by their parents” (p.110). Furthermore, Coleman (1988) argues strongly that,

“Human capital may be irrelevant to outcomes for children if parents are not an important part of their children’s lives, if their human capital is employed exclusively at work or elsewhere outside the home. The social capital of the family is the relations between children and parents (and when families include other members, relationships with them as well). That is, if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child’s educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or small amount, of human capital” (Coleman, 1988, p.110).

Dahrendorf (1979) too suggests that human capital is the most common type of ‘capital’ in society. This is not only in term of educational achievement and advancement, but also in a much more subtle manner, of “most importantly, being able to spot an unexploited opportunity and find a way to make use of it” (Dahrendorf, 1979, p.5.). The debate put forward by Dahrendorf (1979) is similar the points put forward by Coleman (1988), in that,

“human capital needs to be matched by social capital...cultures of low aspiration and fatalism encourage people to believe that low paid work will always be a dead end...persuading people to the contrary is much easier if they have broader and more diverse social networks, because these give them some personal knowledge of what is possible” (Dahrendorf, 1979, p.6).

It must be noted, however, that institutional habitus (Reay et al, 2001) can affect student choices and experiences within institutions differently depending on the degree of cultural and social capital the students possess. All students have to take into account institutional habitus, defined as,

“a complex amalgam of agency and structure...understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation” (Reay et al, 2001, p.2).

In certain circumstances institutional habitus takes precedence (e.g. the effect of pre-requisites upon student choice of subsequent modules). For some students, institutional and personal habitus overlap or coincide (e.g. the capability to make decisions), making academic decisions less problematic for them. The affect of this is to make institutional habitus a reinforcement of what already exists.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) takes the analysis further by articulating the importance of the social relationship aspect of ‘social capital’. Two important areas are integrated into this social capital framework. Firstly, social capital analysis involves a systematic examination of social relational structures and processes that exist within social institutions and their intersections with other related phenomena, including the interactions between family aspirations and educational requirements in the education system. Secondly, social capital analysis incorporates the examination of institutional mechanisms whose effect is to reproduce patterns of exclusion and inclusion of people on the basis of sex, class, and race.



An examination into both of these areas is termed the 'network-analytic approach'. Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues that adopting a network-analytic approach allows an examination into,

"...how social antagonisms and divisions existing in the wider society operate to problematize (if not undermine) ...access to opportunities and resources that are, by and large, taken-for-granted products of middle-class family, community, and school networks" (p.3).

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) theorisation of 'social relations as capital' is important to this particular piece of research as it incorporates the proposition, like Bourdieu's (1993) 'cultural capital', that degrees of restriction on opportunities exist within particular socio-economic groups in society.

"Social capital, the integration within a network of social connections which can be mobilised for particular purposes, is clearly recognised as a distinctive resource together with financial capital and cultural capital" (Nash, 1990, p.432).

The concept of social capital also incorporates the analysis of how those who do not have what is considered the 'social capital' can acquire it through their coping and colonisation activities. Stanton-Salazar (1997) noted that,

"...“coping” can be understood in terms of the problem-solving capacities, network orientations, and instrumental behaviours that are directed toward dealing with stressful borders and institutional barriers. Coping strategies are ultimately successful when barriers are overcome and the resources necessary to accomplish developmental and educational tasks and goals are acquired" (p.26).

While Stanton-Salazar (1997) seems to use the term coping strategy to incorporate colonisation strategies, he also argues that a 'network orientation' enables individuals to overcome institutional barriers through instrumental action such as networking which allows them to gain access to 'social capital'. A network orientation researches the combination of attitudes and beliefs that inform the opportunities individuals have before them and the choices individuals make "in light of social structural circumstances that either expand or constrain his / her options" (p.26).

Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues too that those in more privileged positions exist within a structural network of relationships that provide 'social freeways' which facilitate a continuation of privilege as well as the potential for social mobility.

“In many ways they function as pathways of privilege and power...a fundamental dimension of social inequality in society is that some are able to use these freeways, while others are not. A major vehicle that allows for use of such freeways is an educational experience that is strategic, empowering, and network-enhancing” (p.4).

Another significant contribution here is that of Coleman (1988), who argues that the concept of social capital allows an introduction of social action into the rational action paradigm.

“Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1988, p.98).

Social capital is defined as a resource to individual actors that enables decisions to be made. Social capital is a resource through which though individuals who have it can acquire their goals. It exists within the relations among people.

Coleman (1998) defines three forms of social capital; obligations and expectations; information channels; and social norms. Firstly, obligations and expectations refer to the degree to which individuals trust the social environment of which they are part, and the degree to which obligations are held to guide behaviour. Without the individual actors having trust in the social environment, in any obligations and expectations shall materialise, the social environment would not be able to exist. Information channels, secondly, refers to the degree to which information provides a basis for action, informing social relations and decision-making processes. These information channels, “constitute a form of social capital that provides information that facilitate action...merely for the information they provide” (Coleman, 1988, p.104). Finally, social norms can be either internalised within individual actors or externalised in the way of rewards for an act in the interest of the collective. Social norms, therefore, can facilitate action, though can also act as a constraint on action.

“Thus the language of social capital includes concepts such as trust, connections, reciprocity, mutual aid, social support, social networks, norms, ethics, community and cultures” (Blaxter and Highes, 2000, p.2).

By exploring both ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ capital and the opportunities and constraints students entering higher education face, particularly for non-traditional (non-A level) students, enables a theoretical framework to be developed. This incorporates the



experiences and decision making processes of students whilst studying in higher education as well as how the wider social structure may influence students' decision making processes and 'choices', for

"if we are to understand behaviour we must examine thoroughly the circumstances a person finds himself" (Woods, 1984, p.52).

In the view of this research, such a theoretical framework has to be developed in a syncretic fashion as no one theoretical framework currently available seems to be appropriate. Symbolic interactionists (Mead, 1934), for example, reject the idea of a separate social structure and the individual, arguing that individuals are rational and conscious human beings, interacting with each other which itself forms 'society'. Symbolic interactionists generally do not take into consideration social inequalities such as race, class and gender and how unequal power is distributed within society, within the macro-meso-micro structure and "miss the 'deeper', less easily observable aspects of economic and political power" (Layder, 1995, p.74). This position of Layder (1995) thus places great stress upon the experiences and perceptions of those underlying realities that people have, and their subjective accounting of their perceptions and behaviour. It is important within this research to understand both the subjective and objective interpretations of reality and how students' in higher education construct their own realities.

### **2.3 Objective and Subjective Interpretations of Reality**

Ellis (1995) suggests that individuals have the capacity to consciously think and interpret their own reality, and argues that,

"It is a reasonable assumption that all human beings not only behave and may be observed doing so but also that they consciously reflect on their behaviour; that is they theorise about what they might do, what they are doing, and what they have done" (p.70).

Pollard (1982) too proposes that in these processes,

"it is important to investigate the possible linkages between self-conceptions and the positions of individuals in the social structure" (p.29).

Individuals construct their own social reality and interpretations of the world though social reality is problematic and has no permanent form. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) agree that individuals interpret their realities and make choices dependent on

their 'horizons for action', which comprises the "arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made" (p.34). For Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997),

"Habitus and the opportunity structures of the labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective" (Hodgkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p.34).

Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue too that 'horizons for action' are segmented and fragmented and place opportunities and constraints on individuals interpretations of their reality and the choices seen as available to them within that reality and that "no-one considers the whole range of possible opportunities" (p.35). That being so,

"The task of the social scientist therefore...should be to look behind the level of immediacy in order to try to develop some sociology of situations, their underlying structure and inter-connections and the constraints and contingencies they impose" (Sharp and Green, 1976, p.25).

In order to assist our process of analysis, we have found the work of Burt (1982) on choice theory to be useful. Burt (1982) put forward two distinct features of an individual's perception. For Burt (1982) opportunities can be subjectively evaluated independently of the social situation in which evaluations are made, though at the same time the social context in which an actor is located affects subjective evaluations. In Burt's view, an individual's perceptions and actions will be determined to varying degrees by their interests and their social position.

"Actor interests and behaviours are defined in terms of the relational patterns defining the statuses they occupy in a given system at a given time" (Burt, 1982, p.355).

Related to this, Blau's 'rational choice theory' refers "to the ways in which people actually choose between alternatives" (Homans, 1990, p.78). At the same time, this choice does not question why individuals hold the views they do and accept them as 'given' as "they are so common or can be reliably inferred from the social position of the actors" (Homans, 1990, p.79). 'Rational choice-theory', however, is individualistic and tends not to take into account wider social structures and the implications these have on individual opportunity and choices. That is,



“Rational choice theory is short of propositions about why actors hold the expectations they do about either the value or the probability of success of their actions...the theory usually does not deal systematically with the historical dimensions of a person’s behaviour, with his or her past experience with value and success, and with the circumstances attending upon them” (Homans, 1990, p.79).

Berger and Luckman (1991) too have suggested that individuals “organise this world around the ‘here and now’ of *their* being in it and have projects for working in it”(p.37: italics in original). This stance can be associated with the ‘navigation’ of students through higher education and how their choices link with their ‘realities’. Students make choices dependent upon what they have done, (for example previous educational achievements); what they are doing (which applies to their present interests and opportunities perceived to be available to them); and what they want to do (e.g. their future career interests). These three influential factors form an individual’s reality and ‘life history’. Berger and Luckmann (1991) argue,

“But this internalisation of society, identity and reality is not a matter of once and for all. Socialisation is never total and never finished” (p.157).

Students’ in higher education may make decisions and choices based on perceived opportunities and constraints determined by past, present and future experiences and interests. It is these opportunities and constraints students’ face within higher education that may result in students’ adopting coping strategies and / or colonisation activities.

## **2.4 Coping and Colonisation Strategies**

Within sociology the discussion of colonisation and coping strategies remains limited (Hargreaves, 1978; Hargreaves and Woods, 1984; Woods, 1979; Pollard, 1982) and is relatively underdeveloped in relation to its application to social life. Nonetheless, this research project aims to develop a wider understanding of how individuals adopt colonisation and coping strategies within their daily lives and within the social structures in which they are situated, seeking to relate theories previously put forward (Pollard, 1982; Hargreaves and Woods, 1984; Mandler, 1975; Woods, 1979).

### **2.4.1 Coping Strategies**

‘Coping’ strategies refers to how individuals respond to the constraints and contradictions they may encounter and / or perceive, being a “process that involves



personality characteristics, personal relationships, and situational parameters” (Pierce et al, 1996, p.434). Coping strategies are a situational response to some perceived loss of control, resulting in students ‘fitting into’ roles, procedures and requirements (such as pre-requisites) prescribed by the university and their current social and personal situations. “The value of ‘coping’ as a concept is that it acknowledges the force of constraints” (Woods, 1983, p.111).

Hargreaves (1978) regarded the concept of ‘coping strategies’ as a ‘bridging point’ between the experiences within education and the impact wider social factors have on these experiences. According to Pollard (1982),

“Hargreaves’ crucial point of development was thus in attempt to establish the macro-factors which penetrate even the micro-world of the classroom and influence both teacher and child action” (p.20).

In the context of an analysis of teachers, Hargreaves (1984) summarised coping strategies as being “the product of constructive and creative activity on the part of teachers” (p.66). This recognises individual consciousness and that people respond to demands as ‘constructive meaning-makers’. Hargreaves (1978) argues,

“the use of the concept of coping strategy involve the recognition of man’s essential humanity as a creature of consciousness” (p.76).

Hargreaves (1984) suggests that coping strategies become ‘radical’ only when it is recognised which micro-meso-macro factors impose constraints on individuals and thus have to be ‘coped’ with. Hargreaves (1984) subsequently categorised constraints in his research in three main areas, these being constraints imposed by the education system itself, material constraints, e.g. wealth and family obligations, and constraints imposed by educational ideologies. These three areas of constraints are,

“varied and depend upon the manner in which such constraints combine and exert themselves in any particular situation” (Hargreaves, 1984, p.76).

By recognising societal factors. Haregreaves (1984) takes into consideration the variety of links between the wider social structure and individual experiences. Coping strategies are creative responses to constraints, with feedback loops influencing other changes to be made (e.g. making arrangements to cover domestic requirements in order to fulfill pre-requisite obligations). Hargreaves (1984) consequently argues that

coping strategies can produce stability within institutions rather than radical social change. It is individual experiences and responses to this stability that determines the effectiveness of coping strategies. The final characteristic of coping strategies is that they are based on a number of taken-for-granted assumptions.

Hargreaves (1978) thus recognises the importance of individual experiences and interpretations of reality and that all individuals, whatever their different socio-economic backgrounds, act in response to, and on, their 'experienced worlds'. Coping strategies are created or adopted by individuals to deal with constraints and limitations within their own personal experiences as a result of their interpretations of their reality. Coping strategies, in this approach, are thus conceptualised generally as perceived reactive strategies. Proactive strategies are more properly called colonisation strategies.

#### **2.4.2 Colonisation Strategies**

'Colonisation' refers to the way individuals and social groups identify, perceive and use opportunities and their environment to their advantage, moving forward towards their goals whilst at the same time maintaining some control over the social situation they are in. Woods (1979) argues that individuals do not respond to goals and means in a uniform manner. Individuality needs to be recognised.

In his discussion of colonisation, Woods (1979), building upon Merton (1957), noted five initial modes of adaptation. These modes are conformity, retreatism, intransigence, rebellion and colonisation. Colonisation is the fifth mode of adaptation and is regarded as the most significant and appropriate for students in higher education. Woods (1979) argued that a coloniser,

"employs both official and unofficial means to achieve either official or unofficial means to achieve either official or unofficial ends. He (sic) accepts the official programme in part, and is concerned about 'keeping his nose clean', 'getting on', 'making the grade', in short, getting what he can out of the system" (p.74).

Colonisation activities may involve illegal measures or 'short cuts' in order to make life easier for the individual concerned. Colonisation involves an individual 'working the system' in order to reach personal goals, and to deal with constraining situations



that may arise through what is for them considered to be the most suitable and the least stressful means.

Woods (1979) recognises the importance and influential role of institutional and external social factors on the educational experiences of colonisers. Woods (1983) writes,

“The coloniser...attempts to establish a relatively contented existence...by maximising what he perceives as the available gratifications, whether they are officially permitted or proscribed...In other words, he ‘works the system’, using both legitimate and illegitimate means to achieve his ends” (Woods, 1983, p.90).

Colonisation and coping strategies thus are dialectically related to the manner in which students perceive, experience and manage the ‘choices’ available to them during their studies. Students are neither ‘colonisers’ and / or ‘copers’ purely by chance though elements of chance may arise and affect their decision-making. It may be possible to assume that, to some degree, all students ‘work the system’ and take advantage of the opportunities they see before them in relation to their own concerns. Every student has external commitments, interests, and opportunities that they have to consider and/or come into play when making decisions whilst at university. For the students, higher education is part of their everyday reality, though perceptions may differ for every student involved due to past experiences, present paths and situations, and future expectations.

Taking this further, Barnett (1996) argues,

“Fulfilling the role of student is more demanding than ever. And the students, being rational persons wishing to make their way in the world, know this and respond to it. Precisely because of the press of the totality of the external demands, students may all too easily adopt coping strategies to enable them to get through” (p.73).

It is important to understand that such responses (coping and colonising) are situationally dependent, with locally related understanding and requirements (personal and institutional) ‘causing’ students to become ‘colonisers’ and/or ‘copers’ in the decision making process. As Pollard (1982) suggests,

“we should contextualise the actors themselves as well as the roles which they occupy, and in addition should consider their situationally specific perspectives, goals and interests” (p.21).



When students face constraints on their choices from the higher education institution and of an external nature within their everyday lives and personal lives, they have to make decisions that may affect their chosen course, whilst constantly attempting to fulfil a range of goals and personal interests. Mandler (1975) too argued some time ago that students may find,

“that a particular plan would involve an interaction that is unpleasant or that for one or another physical or social reason cannot be executed...At this point, coping, problem solving, and ‘learning’ take place” (p.170-171).

This does not mean that the outcome is always negative, only that plans or expectations may have to be changed as a result of students “managing to combine education with other life roles and coping with the resultant pressures” (Blaxter et al, 1997, p.144).

Mandler’s (1975) explanation of the decision making process reinforces the concepts of coping and colonisation strategies. Coping clearly refers to how individuals have to handle situations in the most beneficial or least harmful way all or some of their needs as fully as possible. Active pursuit by extension can be associated with ‘colonisation activities’. By solving a problem, an individual can redirect their chosen path to suit their needs fully usually not having to sacrifice their goals.

It is the decision-making process students face whilst adopting coping strategies and/or colonisation activities within higher education that is of particular interest to this research. By understanding the decision-making processes of students and the basis upon which they make their decisions and choices it is possible to understand the opportunities and constraints of different student differentiated on the basis of their access route (see Table 3.2.1) in concert with the impact of wider social structures.

## **2.5 Decision-Making Processes**

Within the process of decision-making each student, with varying degrees of self knowledge and awareness, consider their ‘needs’ alongside perceived available opportunities and constraints related to their position in the institutional and wider social structures (macro-meso-micro) and make decisions on the basis of an

evaluation of their circumstances. Blaxter et al (1997) note, however, that there remains,

“relatively little available research that attempts to link the domains we have identified and consider how adults understand and relate their learning to their work, family and other roles throughout their lives. Such research, and the theoretical development building upon it, is certainly needed if we are to not only understand, but also contribute to, policy and practice on education, work and adult life” (p.137).

By examining the different factors which play an important role within and upon the decision-making processes for students in higher education it may be possible to distinguish different student route of access ‘types’ and to identify patterns or generalisations that may exist. By developing an understanding of the “ways in which those ‘customers’ of education and training provision actually make career decisions” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) this research will be able to indicate,

“at least some of the diversity which results from individuals adapting and reacting, to the expectations, influences and often overt pressures stemming from peers, parents and wider society” (Kenyon, 1997, p.39).

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) examined the career decision-making processes of a sample of young people before and after school leaving age recognising that little or no attention is paid to influential factors such as family, friends and social positions upon the decision making processes of individuals except for,

“the assumption that it is a simple, technically rational process, where (young) people assess their own abilities and interests, evaluate the range of opportunities which are available to them and then make a choice which matches ability to opportunity” (p.31).

By using and recognising the importance of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘habitus’, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) explored not only the decisions made by the young people but the influences of their families and peers on the decisions made and the ‘turning points’ within their life histories. They found that the young people interviewed,

“made decisions that were strongly influenced by their personal dispositions, which in turn were part of their life histories and located in the social, economic and cultural context in which they, their families and friends lived” (Hodkinson, 1998, p.558).

Extending this, Homans (1990) in discussing Blau’s ‘choice-theory’, recognises that individuals do not make decisions purely on the basis of opportunity but also on the perceived likelihood of success and personal benefit. Perceived self-capabilities and opportunities also affect choice and decision-making. Each individual has a

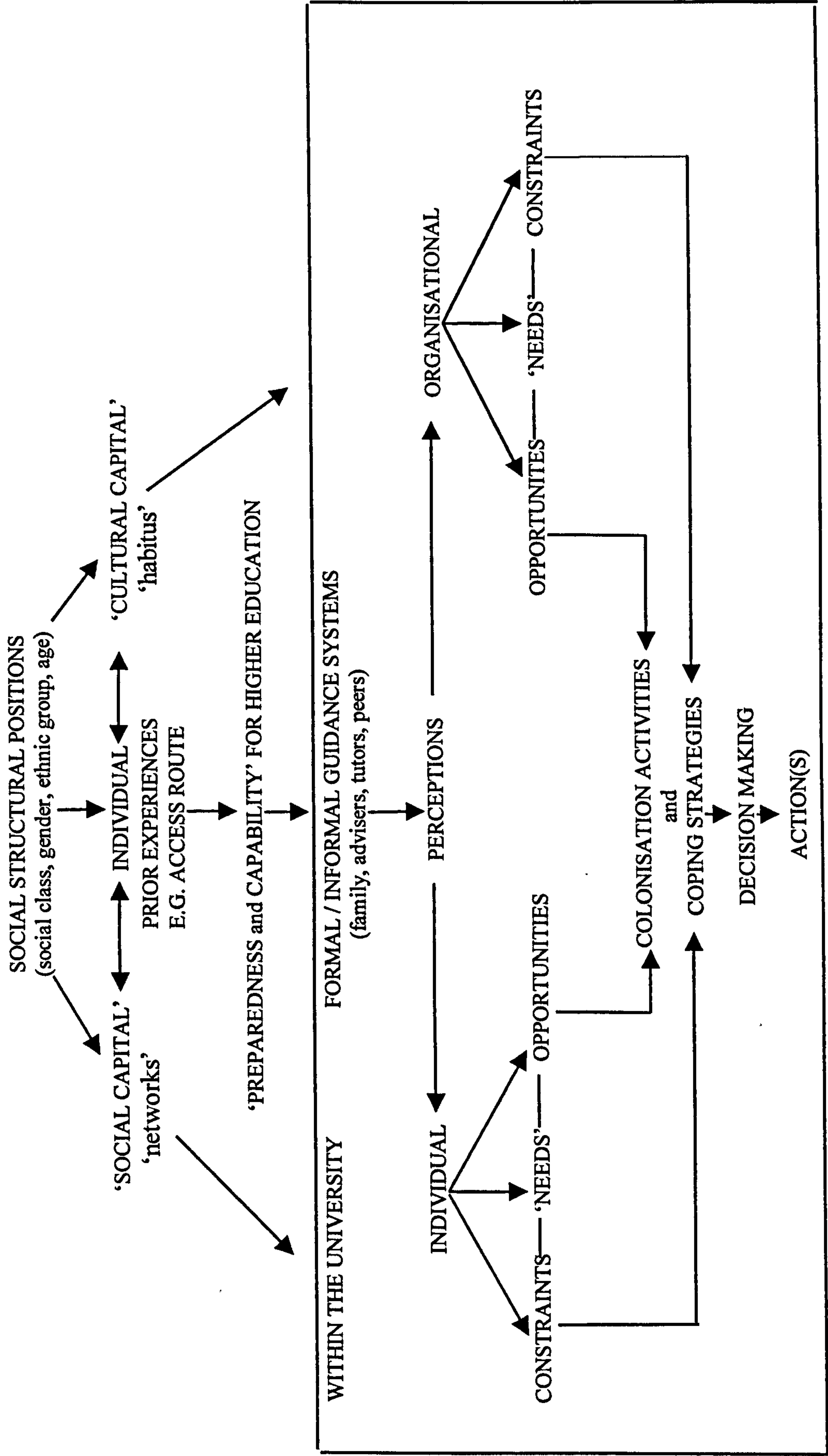
perception, to varying degrees of explicitness, of their own capabilities and needs (e. g. intelligence and requirement for structure) regardless of the extent to which this perception is accurate or not. When novel situations arise, individuals have to make evaluations as to the extent and nature of those opportunities available and whether they are able to take advantage of them. Students in higher education have many decisions arising throughout their studies, whether this is module choice, times of lectures and study, or financial imperatives to work. It is how they perceive their own capabilities and priorities in relation to perceived opportunities that will determine their choice.

The decision-making process utilised in this research is schematically conceptualised in diagram 2.1 overleaf. Each individual has constraints and opportunities, some of which they perceive, and perceived and desired outcomes that they have to decode in order to decide what they wish to do within a structural framework of personal and social constraints, obligations and opportunities.

Diagram 2.1. exemplifies the decision-making context and process which individuals encounter when making a decision. The arrows represent the inter-relationship between the different social and structural layers of the higher education process. The arrows signify too that decision-making is not a one-way process, but one that is constantly shifting between the various layers, though to varying degrees dependent on the social and structural position of the student.



**Diagram 2.1: Decision-Making Process**



From the analysis above and diagram 2.1, it is clear that each student defines themselves through a variety of social and structural positions. Before students enter higher education they are a member of a particular sex, ethnic group, age and social class, all of which may be defined 'objectively' with degrees of subjectivity by the students themselves. These social and structural positions influence present and future expectations, choices and experiences. Arising from and associated with students' social and structural positions are cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993), social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), and institutional habitus (Reay et al, 2001) provide the students with varieties of educational experiences, expectations and preparedness for higher education. The cultural, social, and institutional situations in which students find themselves affect their perceptions of available opportunities and possible outcomes, which in turn affect the decisions and 'choices' that each individual student makes.

As Burt (1982) notes,

"An actor is assumed to have an interest in taking an action because he (sic) perceives some advantage in that action relative to its alternatives...his perception of advantage is contingent on the social context in which he makes the perception" (p.173).

On entering higher education (the box in diagram 2.1) students' encounter formal and informal guidance systems through tutors, advisors, peers and the family, i.e. institutional and social-relational capital. These formal and informal guidance and advice systems provide a student with information as well as influence their perceptions of individual needs (both educational and personal), and the educational needs and requirements of the institution of higher education in which they are studying. It is important to recognise these combinations of influences that impact upon students' decision-making processes. Students are,

"located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution. The relative weight of these spheres of influence are not only different for different individuals but shift and change over time for students" (Reay et al, 2001, p.3).

The opportunities and constraints perceived by students are also a result of the degree of social capital, including human, social-relational, financial, and cultural capital available to them within their own context. This research is concerned with the degree

to which these various forms of capital structure experiences, perceived opportunities and choices, and eventual decision-making processes. The main focus of this theoretical framework, therefore, is to examine the degree to which students who enter higher education and study within it enter with varying degrees of types of capital that subsequently influences and affects their decisions and routes taken through their programmes of study.

Following on from this theoretical framework, which places an initial primacy on social-structural factors, the next chapter considers literature on social class, gender and other facets relevant to students coming into, and experiencing higher education.



## **Chapter 3: Impact of Students' Structural and Social Positions on Their Experiences of Higher Education**

The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) that has been developed for this research/thesis suggests that students have some capacity, within limits, to determine their own actions, and hence their own histories. At the same time, the students do not operate in a vacuum, but on the basis of their structural locations within society, institutions, and the related actors and social groups that constitute both their environment and the context of their actions. This chapter considers the debates relevant to this research focusing on students' social structural positions (social class, gender, ethnicity), age and related commitments, and access routes into higher education.

Once students are in the higher education system, they face and experience different social structures, experiences and constraints that affect them (the meso – institutional level). That being so, chapter 4 analyses those educational aspects relevant to this research, such as modularity, learning experiences, and students' financial situations and accommodation. An end summary collates the main points, and indicates their implications for the research.

### **3.1 Social Class**

Higher education before the 1980's was regarded as an 'elite' system. The majority of students within higher education came from social classes I, II, and III backgrounds (Fulton, 1988). For many students, entering higher education from social classes IV and V was not even an option. With the growth of the higher education system in the 1980's and 1990's, and the intention of opening the doors to all students who wish to, and/or are able to enter higher education, the issue of access to higher education for students from non-traditional groups has become a key area of interest and debate (Hatcher, 1998; Paterson, 1995). Though student numbers are generally increasing each year, reaching approximately one and a half million students in UK universities in the mid 1990's (Silver & Silver, 1997), it remains open to question as to whether opportunity is being created equally for disadvantaged groups and non-traditional

students, particularly those from lower social class backgrounds. The consideration of social class thus is a starting point for the analysis of the structural and social positions of students.

In capitalist societies social class membership strongly influences the distribution of social and financial power and the unequal distribution of social and economic rewards. This manifests itself also in the opportunities people perceive as available to them as well as their present and future positions within the social structure. Reid (1998) suggests that,

“The fundamental assumption is that differences between classes and strata are caused by and persist because of their differing access to almost all social resources, to power positions and to opportunities that, in general, are to the decided advantage of some and the decided disadvantage of others” (p.15).

It is not solely a question, therefore, of how many students within higher education are from which social class group. It is necessary to examine the constraints and the opportunities students from different social class backgrounds have experienced and/or perceived, their social capital and cultural capital, and the extent to which social class has enhanced access or created barriers during their pathways into and throughout higher education.

### **3.1.1 Definitions of Social Class**

Social class does not have a singular definition. Individuals may define or have their social class based upon a variety of influential factors, such as wealth; family background; financial position; home ownership; educational background; area of domicile; accent; political beliefs. Officially, social class is defined through the Registrar Generals Classification of occupations that is shown on table 3.1.1.

The Registrar Generals Classification is based on the proposition that social class can be sufficiently described by using a graded hierarchy of occupations. This system of categorisation assumes that,

“a single piece of information - typically occupation - is a good general predictor of a host of other factors such as income, education, style of life, attitudes, interests and beliefs, which together form their concept of social class” (Paterson, 1995, p.3).

The General Registrar’s Classification thus assumes that individuals within the same level category of occupation are likely to lead broadly similar lifestyles and experiences and hold similar beliefs.

**Table 3.1.1: Registrar Generals Classification of Occupations**

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| I and II:           | Professional and managerial (for example, doctors, lawyers, teachers, managers)              |
| III <sub>nm</sub> : | Skilled non-manual (for example, clerks, shop assistants)                                    |
| III <sub>m</sub> :  | Skilled manual (for example, bricklayers, coal-miners)                                       |
| IV, V:              | Semi-skilled and unskilled manual (for example, bus conductors, postmen, porters, labourers) |
| Unclassified:       | No information (mostly fathers who have been unemployed for a lengthy period of time)        |

*Source: Paterson, 1995, p.79.*

Occupation, for the majority of individuals, is the main or only predictable avenue to wealth. This in turn, can affect access to other social resources and opportunities. Such a structured categorisation of individuals places them within a particular social group but does not fully explain differences in life-chances and social behaviours. As Reid (1998) argues, “occupation cannot be seen as the sole basis of perceived social class” (p.35). It is important to consider also the social capital and cultural capital of students within higher education alongside social class.

**3.1.2 The Significance of Social Class for Education**

Remaining in education after school leaving age, achieving entrance qualifications and applying to and entering higher education are stages of educational progression that are influenced by an individual’s social class. Paterson (1995) suggests,

“Class differences build up over successive selection points in the educational system - staying on beyond the minimum leaving age, achieving higher - education entry qualifications having stayed on, and deciding to apply to higher education having achieved these qualifications” (p.77).

It needs to be recognised, however, that social class alone does not completely influence or determine an individuals life pathway but is one (if perhaps the major) of



many inter-linked social factors. "All these elements combine in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities" (Ball, 1993, p.17). As Allatt (1993) states,

"Within the institutional framework of the education system, however, it is possible for some individuals to weave, to some extent, their own pathways and create additional milestones and openings; for in the passage through the life course, irrespective of social class, individuals and families draw upon what resources they have to ease, shape and enhance their journeys as best they can" (p.144).

It is not only the education system that can affect educational progression and achievement but also the social disadvantages that exist in society. Two examples put forward by Paterson (1995) are material resources (such as a lack of resources to study) and the financial costs of post-compulsory education. The second example consists of the cultural resources of individuals and groups such as a lack of importance placed on education and low expectations from peers and teachers to achieve well and to learn. Children from lower social class groups may be alienated from education (Willis, 1977) and are less likely to do as well as middle class children, especially in relation to continuing their education after the compulsory school leaving age of 16 years. Consequently, social class has long been considered a 'predictor' of educational attainment, though as Furlong (1997) noted,

"With education playing such an important role in the process of social reproduction, any trend towards the establishment of a 'classless' society should be manifest in a significant weakening of the relationship between social class and educational experiences" (p.57).

The influence of secondary education upon an individual's likelihood of gaining a place at university is important to understanding the different educational achievements of students from different social groups. Some time ago, Becker (1984) conducted a study consisting of sixty interviews with teachers during the 1950's examining how public school teachers "observe, classify and react to class - typed differences in the behaviour of the children with whom they work" (p.98). The intention of Becker's (1984) research was to bring to light the different educational opportunities available to children from different social class backgrounds and to examine the difficulties of being a teacher avoiding direct questions related to opinions towards students and their social classes whilst discussing teaching, discipline and moral acceptability.

Becker (1984) found that the teachers considered children from the lower social class group the most difficult to teach due to them “lacking in interest in school, learning ability, and outside training” (p.100). The teachers also regarded these children as difficult to control and morally unacceptable through their use of words, actions and appearances. In contrast, however, the children from the middle social class group were considered to be motivated in school though sometimes lacking outside training. Middle class children were considered easy to handle in relation to discipline and were well dressed and well behaved. The children from upper social class groups were regarded as capable and enthusiastic to learn, yet spoilt and difficult to handle and lacked politeness and respect.

Becker’s (1984) study recognised the biases that often exist within the education system towards the less than ‘ideal’ student, more specifically towards students from lower, socially disadvantaged social class groups. As Becker (1984) argued,

“Such consequences of teachers’ differential reaction to various class groups obviously operate to further perpetuate those class cultural characteristics to which they object in the first place” (p.101).

Egerton & Halsey (1993) support the findings by Becker (1984) and argue that little has changed within higher education in relation to its class structure. Paterson (1995) too puts forward many reasons why students from working class backgrounds do not continue their education and in particular enter higher education and suggests that,

“the reluctance even of qualified working-class pupils to apply include doubts about their own abilities, lack of encouragement by their family and school, financial pressures to start earning as soon as possible and being deterred by an image of higher education as being socially remote” (p.83).

Hatcher (1998) reinforces Paterson’s (1995) argument that it is not only the attainment levels of working class students which determines their application and entry levels to higher education, but also the decisions made by institutions, the students themselves, and the students’ families, hence the emphasis within this thesis upon social capital and cultural capital. These impinge on the decisions students make which determine which pathway they take at each ‘branching point’. Hatcher (1998) argued,



"that objective criteria of academic achievement explain only a part of the social inequalities in selections. The other important mechanism is families' and pupils' choices" (p.8).

Allatt (1993) examined the family processes which transmit privilege within middle class families and found that,

"privilege is not automatically transmitted but depends upon purposeful activity directed towards the maintenance of class position and prevention of downward mobility" (p.142).

Allatt (1993) emphasises that such 'purposeful activity' is supported by economic, cultural, social and emotional resources (habitus). Economic resources refers to the available finance that parents are able to use to support their children, such as the ability to pay for private and further education for their children. Cultural resources are personal and social attributes such as formal qualifications and self-identity, including self-presentation, confidence, speech and social etiquette. Social resources refers to sociability and the surrounding social networks which enable access to, and identity with, middle class groups. Emotional resources are the personal standards of perseverance sustained by the bond of family and friendships, including the valuable time shared as a family unit. Allatt (1993) went on to say that,

"Through these systems, characterised by freedoms within boundaries of control, the families attempted to build young people's social and cultural capital, handing on skills and attributes to the young. The qualities encouraged, developed and sustained through family practices over the long years of schooling - responsibility, individualism, hard work, effort and pleasure in achievement, social competence and access to critical social networks - are those which have long been associated with occupational advancement and economic success among the middle classes" (Allatt, 1993, p.157).

Consequently,

"At each stage, social class may be well down the list of predictors of performance but its cumulative effects, gradually mounting over time, mean that its eventual hold on life chances proves considerable" (Roberts, 1993, p.232).

Allatt (1993) argues that it is not their social class per se which encourages or discourages the success within education but the extent to which social class factors permeates the environment in which a person lives and the opportunities which they see available to them through their social capital and cultural capital.



Goldthorpe (1996) used Rational Action Theory (RAT) to understand and explain inequalities in education believing that individuals make what are for them rational choices that in turn affect action. Goldthorpe (1996) argued that working class families perceive the risk of continuing their education as too high in relation to their resources. Working class families and individuals feel they are taking a risk by continuing their education, as success cannot be guaranteed. Consequently, at key stages within educational progression, working class families are likely to choose less ambitious routes compared to middle class families. Though Goldthorpe (1996) emphasises the importance of 'choice' and the different opportunities and constraints individuals from different social class backgrounds face, wider social and structural influences are not ignored, though underplayed. Goldthorpe (1996), it is argued, however,

“operates out of a weak notion of rationality which helps explain the presenting problem as to why people behave the way they do, but does not explain what it is that conditions their choices in a particular way. Neither does it explain which options are more open, and / or more acceptable to particular groups than others, and why. The model does not explain the way structures, particularly in terms of state action, might explain particular social class actions” (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p.447).

Lynch & O’Riordan (1998) believe that educational choices are not fixed but can be changed by experience, particularly educational experiences, and suggest,

“Class differences in education are not the result of some set of preconceived preferences...rather they are the by-product of an ongoing set of negotiations between agents and structures” (p.447).

Lynch & O’Riordan (1998) conducted a study examining the barriers low-income working class students face when gaining access to and studying in higher education. They found that there were three types of barriers that working class students encountered.

“First there are *economic constraints* which are independent of education in terms of origin, but which impact directly on educational decisions: second, there are *institutional constraints* specific to the education system itself, arising from the nature of schooling and the way in which educational systems are organised; third, there are *cultural constraints* which arise due to conflicts in cultural practices between the life world of the students and the organisational culture of schools as social institutions” (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p. 452).

In relation to economic factors Lynch & O’Riordan (1998) found that low-incomes and poverty were the main barriers to gaining access to higher education. Working

class families were primarily concerned with 'making ends meet'. In such circumstances, higher education was regarded as a luxury. Working class students were also more likely to have no proper place at home to study and lacked the necessary study resources. Lynch & O'Riordan (1998) argue that these resources include,

"education-related resources such as reference material and computers, and educationally relevant travel, especially in the language area. Most of these services could be purchased in the private education market by more advantaged families: this enabled them to maintain their relative advantage in the competition for places in higher education" (p.459).

Some students from low-income, working class families also face the pressure of contributing to the family income and consider leaving school early to work. Of those who remained in school beyond school leaving age, half worked part-time out of school hours but often missed school due to tiredness. It was found that students from low-income families also had low aspirations and lacked knowledge into how the education system worked. Consequently "the effects of poverty on educational aspirations were direct and immediate" (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998, p.459).

The social and cultural barriers faced by working class students found by Lynch & O'Riordan (1998) included the devaluation of working class culture within society. This often results in low self-esteem amongst working class students and lowered aspirations for higher education. Negative educational experiences of working class parents, and school provision in low-income areas in turn did not create a 'cultural climate' that promoted or encouraged post-compulsory school education.

Students in the study also specified that the school they attended made an impact on their educational success in relation to choice of subjects, facilities, disruptions in the class due to behaviour problems, and a high teacher turn over rate. Lynch & O'Riordan (1998) note that,

"The economic, cultural and educational practices which constrain low-income working class students' opportunities for higher education cannot be regarded as discrete entities. They operate in a complex set of interactive ways with one another and are experienced by the students, their families and teachers as a highly integrated set of barriers to equal access and participation" (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998, p.473).



Working-class individuals who did not have the opportunity to continue their education earlier in their lives may return to education, particularly further education, as mature students. As Egerton & Halsey (1993) suggest,

"people from less advantaged social groups might tend to gain access to tertiary education as mature students, thus compensating for deficiencies in their secondary education" (p.187).

Willis (1977) too conducted research into working class culture and 'how working-class kids get working-class jobs'. Willis (1977) suggested that it is difficult for young workers to return to education, for,

"In the first place, the young worker is likely to have acquired family, home and financial commitments of his own which make an unpaid return to college out of the question" (Willis, 1977, p.107).

It is interesting to determine whether those students returning to higher education are from middle class families and in an economic position to do so or from working class families returning due to missed opportunities earlier in their lives.

Reid (1998) noted that it is not simply the social backgrounds of the students entering higher education that is imbalanced, but also which students are entering which university. Social class may influence the opportunities and the choices of particular students to enter particular universities. Reid (1998) states, however, that once students enter higher education, social class does not appear to affect the grades achieved or class of degree. This assertion appears not to recognise the importance of constraints such as finance, employment, dependents, and inadequate information and resources and the impact these may have on a student's performance and experiences within higher education for both young and mature students.

### **3.2 Age and Access Routes into Higher Education**

Prior to the 1980's higher education traditionally focused upon school leavers entering educational courses in higher education. During the past 15 to 20 years, however, this has changed due to national policies promoting an increase in the variety of access routes available into higher education. Widening access has resulted in more mature students, those over the age of twenty-one years (25 years in some studies, e.g. Newstead et al, 1997) studying in higher education (Richardson, 1997).

The number of mature students entering higher education rose from 139,000 to 319,000 between 1982 and 1992 (Hartley & Trueman, 1997). McGivney (1996) consequently suggested,

“the traditional student body has changed considerably over the last 10 to 15 years, a trend encouraged by increasing flexibility in entry requirements, course structures, learning modes and assessment methods” (p.3).

Compared to the traditional route into higher education followed by school leavers, of achieving two or three A levels, mature students either enter higher education through the learning gained through previous employment positions or through attending courses within a further education institution such as an Access course (Richardson, 1997). In 1989/90, 23% of the mature student population in higher education entered without standard qualifications, i.e. A levels, Access and Foundation qualifications, and this increased to 38% of the mature student population by 1993/94 (McGivney, 1996).

Thombs (1997) examined pre-entry higher education students and recognised three main routes into higher education, these being traditional, vocational and access routes. Thombs (1997) identified six variations of these routes (table 3.2.1). In his research, therefore, Thombs (1997) identified a total of nine different access routes into higher education. Thombs (1997) found that,

“though some of the sample had followed one of the recognised three routes there was considerable diversity of educational experiences among individuals allocated to these routes” (p.94).

By institutions focusing solely on the three access routes of traditional, vocational and Access into higher education, Thombs (1997) suggests that the diversity of the student experience is being “masked” (Thombs, 1997, p.94). Consequently it was considered beneficial and important to this research that using the nine access routes identified by Thombs (1997) would allow any diversities to be identified and explored between different student types by access route, i.e. students’ of different social and structural characteristics that ‘choose’ to enter higher education via different access routes. Table 3.2.1 lists the nine access routes identified by Thombs (1997) that were subsequently used within this research.



**Table 3.2.1: Access Routes into Higher Education**

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Route A: | Students who entered university directly after leaving school  |
| Route B: | Students who left school, went to FE and then directly to university.  |
| Route C: | Students who transferred into FE from the 6 <sup>th</sup> form (with or without completing their course) and then directly to university.  |
| Route D: | Students who entered university via an Access course.  |
| Route E: | Students who gained university entrance qualifications through involvement in a range of different types of educational provision other than Access courses: evening, part-time day, OU, other distance learning etc.  |
| Route F: | Students who entered university via a vocational route i.e. those who gained vocational qualifications that are acceptable for university entrance as part of their training for a form of employment.   |
| Route G: | Students who had been in the higher education system prior to their current course. For example, those who had a degree or degree equivalent qualification or who may have commenced a course that they did not complete.  |
| Route H: | Students who obtained the qualifications necessary for university entrance during their school career (or equivalent FE programme), left the education system and entered university at a later date. In the meantime they had no contact with the education system. |
| Route I: | Students in the under 20 age group who, in effect, followed Route A but were involved in other activities before starting their university programme.  |

*Source: Thombs, 1997, p.95*

One such study that sought to unmask that diversity was that of Kenyon (1997) who interviewed twenty-eight students in Sunderland during 1992-1995 in relation to their experiences and views of student life. Students' ages were found to be a key shorthand key to their experiences within higher education, being associated with other significant factors such as marriage and having dependents. For 'school-leaver incomers' Kenyon (1997) found that their experiences as students were very traditional as they had moved away from the parental home, lived with other students, made new friendships with other students, had few responsibilities, and had few restrictions on their time and behaviour. This group saw being a student as "a period of development from adolescence to young adulthood" (Kenyon, 1997, p.34).

A second group identified by Kenyon (1997) were the 'school-leaver local' students who were within the age group of the traditional 18 year old student but had not moved away from the parental home and were studying at a local institution of higher

education. Kenyon (1997) found that through “purposive decision making” (p.38) these students had made choices that enabled them to take on a new student identity and partially break away from past pressures such as spending time with families and old friends. This group had to be flexible to allow a continuation of family life and local friendships alongside the student life and student friendships. Due to remaining in the parental home, however, this group,

“did not participate fully in the ‘living and learning’ student culture, returning to a non-student dwelling at the end of the working and socialising day” (Kenyon, 1997, p.38).

‘Mature incomers’ were the third group, those who had become students at non-traditional older ages. This group did not associate higher education and being a student as a transition period from adolescence to adulthood. Instead mature incomers saw their educational experiences as a career and personal development choice. This group had previously moved away from their parental homes to form their own households. Their educational experiences, therefore, centred around studying and becoming a graduate. For the mature incomers Kenyon (1997) found that,

“Unlike many of their school-leaver contemporaries, the decision to return to higher education was seen to result from the individual’s own purposive choice. This positive decision helped to give them the courage to overcome the age stereotypes attached to studenthood, and thus participate in their own variation on the theme of the twenty-four hour living and learning experience” (Kenyon, 1997, p.37).

The student experience was “adapted” by the mature incomers to suit their needs and priorities whilst studying in higher education. Kenyon (1997) found, therefore, that the “traditional experience is neither static nor uniform” (p.39).

### **3.2.1 Reasons for Studying in Higher Education**

Newstead et al (1997) too conducted research into why students were studying in higher education, focusing particularly on possible differences between traditional and mature students. Reasons for studying were strongly linked to the ages of the students. Newstead et al (1997) devised three categories that each defined the reasons for studying and are shown on table 3.2.2.



**Table 3.2.2: Reasons for Studying**

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Stop Gap:             | avoiding work<br>laziness<br>allowing time out to decide on career<br>social life<br>fun and enjoyment  |
| Means To An End:      | improving standard of living<br>improving chance of getting a job<br>developing career<br>getting a good qualification<br>getting worthwhile job        |
| Personal Development: | improving life skills<br>reaching personal potential<br>gaining knowledge for it's own sake<br>further academic interest<br>gaining control of own life |

*Source: Newstead et al, 1997, p.187*

Traditional students were mostly studying as a 'stop gap' compared to mature students who were mostly studying for personal development reasons. Both groups were equally as likely to study as a means to an end. It was found that,

"mature students are a highly motivated group, who wish their degree to be the result of their own work and effort, and who tend to achieve good degrees" (Newstead et al, 1997, p.190).

In contrast, Britton & Baxter (1999) found that mature students entered higher education as a process of reconstructing their own identities. Britton & Baxter (1999) interviewed twenty-one mature students and found that,

"for all these mature student education is a key site for the construction of identity, but the meaning of education and it's significance for self-identity varies" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.179).

Britton & Baxter (1999) define the mature students reasons for entering higher education through the use of four categories or rationales, these being 'unfulfilled potential', 'struggling against the odds', 'credentialism', and 'self-transformation'. Each category was associated with different orientations to education.

'Unfulfilled potential' was cited as the most common reason for entering higher education amongst the mature students. Education was a means through which

mature students could become the 'self' they always wanted to be, but never did due to missed or limited opportunities. This was explained through,

"the experience of educational failure, or 'missing out' in some way at an earlier stage which left a sense of 'unfinished business'" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.183).

'Struggling against the odds' was the term particularly used by working-class women who had left school at sixteen years old with no or few qualifications, had a family and then re-entered the workforce once their children were in school. The themes of these women's narratives were,

"struggling against the odds to get out of the dead-end of working-class married women's jobs. In each account there was a kind of revelation, a moment of realisation at which a decision was made to change the pattern of their life, expressed as a need to take control over their future prospects" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.186).

This process was instrumental and was geared towards the need for personal development that can be strongly associated with Newstead et al (1997) findings.

The third category 'credentialism', related to "the need for formal recognition as a means to validate and further a career" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.187). This category was not used often by the mature students as a reason for entering higher education. Finally, 'self-transformation' "focuses explicitly on changes in the self and identity as the catalyst for returning to education" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.188). Some of the mature students saw higher education as a process of challenges in order to create and develop a new 'self', and that the,

"self is conceptualised as a 'new' self which is the outcome of an active process of self-reflection" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.189).

Education was also seen as a means of social mobility and that "the processes of self-change...at the point of entry to higher education are ongoing" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.192).

In these studies, it is clear that mature students face different opportunities and constraints compared to traditional, 18 year old students whilst studying within higher education. Hartley & Trueman (1997), however, examined the module marks for mature students and traditional students between 1993-94 and 1994-95 and found that there were no significant differences in achievement levels. They recognised,



however, that though these findings are encouraging, they do not reflect the differential experiences of students, particularly in relation to age. Instead, Hartley & Trueman (1997) suggest that,

“Individual students may arrive at the same degree class by a variety of different routes, and our procedure of examining students’ end of year marks of degree classes does not enable us to differentiate between students with vastly different background experiences. An unmarried mature student aged 21 years living in a hall of residence is probably closer to a traditional-entry student than is one aged 30 years, married and living at home with young children” (p.180).

Woodley et al (1987) too support the view put forward by Hartley & Trueman (1997) finding that mature students’ experiences of higher education varied considerably and in many instances were different to the experiences of traditional students. The three main areas which provided challenges for mature students whilst studying were financial difficulties, personal and domestic commitments and the attitudes of significant others. It was found by Woodley et al (1987) that,

“Financial costs are clearly a factor in the decision to return to study, and financial problems may affect a student’s ability to complete a course. For some students these financial costs will be set against the long-term financial benefits which are expected from consequent promotions or career changes” (p.123).

The main financial difficulty amongst mature students was the reduction in income due to leaving a full-time job in order to study. A loss of earnings from overtime, part-time jobs, and promotional opportunities were also stated by the mature students to be constraints on their financial position whilst studying. Mature students with families also faced the additional costs of dependent others. As Woodley et al (1987) argue,

“Full-time mature students face the additional financial problem of maintaining themselves and possibly their families during their period of study” (p.126).

Mature students with families faced not only financial restrictions but also restrictions on their time to study. Woodley et al (1987) found that only one in five of 21-30 year olds had dependent children compared to the majority of 31-60 year olds having children.

“The competing demands of studying and maintaining family commitments is clearly a significant part of the mature student experience” (Woodley et al, 1987, p.131).

Mature students found that their main source of encouragement came primarily from their partner or spouse with other influences such as tutors, friends, other relatives having little impact on their motivation and reason to study. However, Woodley et al (1987) suggest that,

“discouraging attitudes from significant others are so effective as a barrier to study that only those people who do not have to contend with them become mature students” (p.141).

McGivney (1996) suggests that, before entering higher education, students need to receive more information and guidance in relation to what being a student can entail. The differing images and expectations of students, in particular students from different age groups, may contradict the actual experiences of students. McGivney (1996) suggests,

“students who discontinued their programmes of study had experienced a clash between their expectations and their actual experience of academic life” (p.125).

Problems such as the size of an institution and issues of anonymity in a formal environment can all lead to students not ‘fitting in’ and thus leaving their course and the institution in which they were studying.

### 3.3 Gender

Gender roles can affect the educational experiences and opportunities of both men and women. It is important, however, to clearly define the difference between sex and gender. Lightbody & Durendell (1996) explain the difference as,

“...‘sex’ as ‘the biological differences between males and females’ and ‘gender’ as ‘the manner in which culture defines and constrains these differences’” (p.134).

Though gender is socially constrained it is not socially determined. Individuals do have some ‘choice’ to make decisions based on their life experiences and expectations, their social capital and cultural capital, and the opportunities they see available to them. It is the opportunities individuals see before them, especially in terms of their gender, however, which determines outcome. As Green and Cohen (1995) argue, “gender is an important aspect of the ways in which women perceive their ‘available opportunities’” (p.301).



In relation to gender and higher education there are three main areas of interest to this research. These areas are the increasing number of women studying within higher education, the possible bias in subjects that women and men choose to study whilst in higher education and the differential experiences of men and women in higher education.

It has been suggested that men and women enter higher education for different reasons. Men enter higher education for 'instrumental' reasons and women for personal fulfilment (Edwards, 1993; Pascall & Cox, 1993). Britton & Baxter (1999) interviewed twenty-one mature students and found that for women in particular who have decided to enter higher education, that,

"education is a key site for the construction of identity, but the meaning of education and its significance for self identity varies" (p.179).

Three main explanations to explain why more women are now entering higher education have been put forward by researchers (Pascall & Cox, 1993; Millman, 1991; Green & Cohen, 1995). Women firstly are entering higher education as a result of personal interest and a desire to study for self-satisfaction and achievement (Pascall & Cox, 1993). Secondly, entry to higher education is seen as a result of the changing roles of women in the home with more women contributing to the finances of a family either in support of a spouse or partner or as the sole provider for herself and (where applicable) her family (Millman, 1991; Leckey, 1995). Thirdly, education is sought for qualifications to enable the realisation of an ambition within a specific career or for better employment prospects (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Green & Cohen, 1995). It is important to recognise that these reasons often are inter-linked.

Though women continue to face dilemmas such as the need to be financially secure for their families, women entering higher education often have motivations that go deeper, such as "the need for a change in themselves, for intellectual development and 'self-realisation'" (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p.74). Pascall & Cox (1993) in their study of mature women students in higher education found that the women showed a,

"rich seam of belief in the personal value of education: in the satisfaction that came from meeting a challenge, proving that it was possible, overcoming the odds, and above all enjoying the struggle and the triumph" (p.91).

Women may feel that education will provide not only a degree of independence and better future prospects in relation to finance and employment but also a degree of self-worth and fulfilment, an increase in confidence levels and a desire to achieve what previously, for whatever reasons, they were unable or did not choose to do so.

Britton and Baxter (1999) compared mature male and female students, and found that mature males returned to education on the basis of a previous 'missed opportunity', having been 'pushed' into male jobs which were unfulfilling.

"For individual men, the trigger to this self-questioning may be any significant life-changing event, such as accident, divorce or redundancy" (p.191).

In comparison to the mature male students, Britton and Baxter (1999) found that mature women in their study entered higher education to be valued and to fulfil their long time desire for education. For many women, however, marriage and family life had resulted in their educational goals not previously being reached, particularly,

"working-class women who left school at 16 with few or no qualifications because it was expected of them on account of their class and gender. This is the group with the least cultural capital, the classic women returners who typically followed an Access route into higher education. Their lives followed a 'normal' life course for a working-class woman, of full-time paid employment for a few years before marriage and children, followed by re-entry to the labour market on different terms when the children went to school" (p.186).

Pascall & Cox (1993) found, in their study of mature women students, that once their children were grown up and the women could no longer use motherhood as a central role, they had to reconsider options available to them in order to occupy their time, causing them to re-evaluate themselves and their self-identity. This left the women in the position of,

"opening up possibilities - looking to a future in which they would build a public career to complement or take the place of the private career of domesticity" (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p.77).

Leonard (1994) supports the findings of Pascall & Cox (1993), and noted,

"the wider structural characteristics of the household on women's personal so-called 'decisions' to return to education" (Leonard, 1994, p.167).



Sperling (1991) strongly believed that higher education needed to dismantle those 'barriers' that affect women within higher education, particularly mature women, returning to education with non-academic commitments.

"Many of these obstacles are quite obvious to all who care to acknowledge them. These include such things as lack of childcare facilities in institutions, and timetables that do not accommodate women's commitments and responsibilities beyond study" (Sperling, 1991, p.200).

Leonard (1994) too found that family life and responsibilities had significant influence on the experiences of mature women studying in higher education. The partners of mature women expected to continue with their family role and duties alongside studying and that support, both emotional and financial, often depended on the family structure and household duties remaining unchanged. Leonard (1994) consequently argued that,

"the greatest drawback mature students may face is the patriarchal attitude of their marital partner and their continued adherence to ideologies of gender stereotyping which results in women having to engage in an endless juggling act of trying to balance home, family and university commitments" (p.176).

It would be unfair to suggest that only women and not men have non-academic commitments that can affect their studies. We need to examine the different experiences of female and male students and the gender roles they play in areas such as family and domestic life and how these can have an impact on their experiences as students and the choices and decisions they make whilst studying in higher education.

### **3.3.1 Gender Differences and Choice of Subject**

Gender identification may influence which subjects women choose to study compared to men (Lightbody & Durndell, 1996) and which careers and 'types' of jobs women enter after leaving higher (Coffey & Acker, 1991). The overall concern about the numbers of women in higher education is diminishing, however, due to the fact that women now constitute half of all undergraduate numbers. Concern is now placed, not on achieving equal numbers of each sex within education, but in relation to the subjects women are choosing to study compared to men. Fewer women take science subjects compared to men, and fewer men study languages or human science subjects compared to women. In 1992 only 14% of Computer Studies and engineering students were female (Lightbody & Durndell, 1996).

Decision-making processes are related to how an individual define themselves in terms of their capabilities, career priorities, personal needs, and their membership of a specific gender and family circumstances. It is not the sex of an individual which influences career choice so much as the socio-economic roles associated with each sex which influences the decisions made and the future expectations of women and men. That is,

"A decision to follow a particular career is not only based on the expected tasks involved, but also on the interaction between an individual's social identity and their representation of that profession" (Lightbody & Durndell, 1996, p.135).

Leckey et al (1995) believe that careers for women and men are very different. The social expectations about which 'sex' is more appropriate for different types of jobs, the socially defined domestic roles and parenting roles for women and men, and possible discrimination within the workplace can affect not only their career development but also their goals and personal expectations.

Coffey and Acker (1991) suggest that the consequence of teaching being a predominantly female domain is the result of a neglect of equal opportunities. Davidson & Cooper (1992) for instance, argue that women face the 'glass ceiling' when considering and applying for promotion within education, an invisible barrier that cannot be seen but does exist, one which prevents women entering their chosen profession being promoted to senior posts within their chosen profession. Davidson & Cooper (1992) suggest that this,

"glass ceiling is invisible but women experience it as a very real barrier when they vie for promotion to top jobs" (p.15).

Women are recognising that there are a growing number of opportunities available to them with education playing a prominent part in this vision. Their social roles are changing and thus so are their experiences and life expectations.

### **3.4 Ethnic Group Membership**

Throughout this research the term 'minority ethnic' will be used instead of 'ethnic minority' to describe students who do not come from the majority ethnic group. The definition ethnic minority implies that ethnicity is only applicable to a minority of



people, yet minority ethnic implies that all individuals have ethnicity, with different ethnic groups either being part of a majority or a minority group (Cole, 1993). That being so, the debate is ongoing in relation to minority ethnic students within higher education.

Throughout research and education literature the terminology used to describe minority ethnic groups is varied and controversial and is often linked to the 'colour' of skin rather than the race and culture of different individuals and groups in society. Gradually, over time, terminology is changing for what was previously regarded as appropriate may now be regarded as politically incorrect. The over usage of the term 'black' to describe any non-white person, for example, is inappropriate as it is related mainly to colour and not race or culture. It is important to construct racial and cultural definitions that represent each ethnic group. As Cole (1993) argues, despite prejudice,

"there are very, very few people of Irish, Chinese or Southern European origin or Jewish people, for example, who would identify themselves as 'black', even in this 'political' sense" (p.672).

Though there is no doubt in a sociological and political sense that the 'colour' of an individual skin can lead to prejudice and discrimination it is important to recognise that not all minority ethnic groups are of the same 'skin colour' though all of their experiences' remain important.

Between 1973 and 1990, the ethnic origin of pupils in schools and of students in further and higher education was not recorded by a succession of governments. It was not until 1990 that official monitoring of minority ethnic groups was introduced. Without monitoring being carried out on a national scale it was very difficult to gain an accurate picture of minority ethnic students within higher education.

The figures of applications and those applications accepted for students from minority ethnic backgrounds onto university courses, symbolise what Modood (1992) called the 'overrepresentation' of minority ethnic students in institutions of higher education. Modood (1992) argued that though there is clear bias in the selection, there is still a higher percentage per population of minority ethnic students in higher education than

white students. In 1991 9% of applicants to universities were from minority ethnic backgrounds though the minority ethnic population made up only 5.5% of the population (Mason, 1996). Only 6.9% of those who applied, however, were accepted onto courses.

The statistics provided by PCAS in 1991 and 1992 showed that 14.3% and 13.4% respectively of applications were from minority ethnic students to polytechnics and colleges. However, in 1992 only 26,031 students from minority ethnic backgrounds applied for a university place compared to 41,118 in 1991, which comprised of 10.2% of all applications. Modood (1993) argues,

“ethnic minority numbers and representation is greater for nearly all groups, including those entering university than most people would have guessed...and the diversity between them is such that it is not obvious what generalisations can be sustained about race and education in Britain” (p.172).

Variations between minority ethnic groups existed in 1990/91 for instance, with only 0.35% of polytechnic and college applicants and 0.3% of university applications came from Bangladeshi students. Between 1990-1991 the only other minority ethnic group that provided relatively low university applications were black applicants, and this continues to be so (*Until 1991 UCCA did not sub-divide black applicants into the appropriate ethnic groups*). Despite that, “the low participation of Bangladeshi women and Afro-Caribbean men in HE has also been well documented” (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, July 1997, p.6).

Though the statistics show that most minority ethnic groups are 'over-represented' in higher education there is a clear distinction between the numbers of applications from minority ethnic groups to the 'new' post 1992 universities compared to the numbers that apply to the 'old' universities. Whether the low acceptance rates of minority ethnic students into universities are a result of racial discrimination or bias on the parts of the selectors cannot and is unlikely ever to be completely answered. Despite that, a variety of social factors have been recognised and put forward by UCCA and other researchers (e.g. Singh, 1990; Taylor 1992; Modood 1993) as explanations for the differing acceptance rates between students from different ethnic backgrounds.



One explanation put forward to explain the differences in acceptance rates between students from different ethnic groups are the types of courses that minority ethnic students apply for. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds tend to apply for more competitive courses, such as Medicine and Law, which require higher entrance grades (UCCA, 1991). Taylor (1992) argues that applicants from minority ethnic backgrounds apply for courses on the basis of 'other' qualifications, those being qualifications other than the standard A levels. This places minority ethnic students in a disadvantaged position, particularly when applying for the more competitive courses, which demand high A level grades. Taylor (1992) also argues that minority ethnic applicants apply with qualifications achieved through having to resit the examination in more cases than white students.

For courses with lower entrance requirements such as teacher training Taylor (1992) found that there are very few applications by individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds.

“The very low application rates from ethnic minorities for education courses are noticeable” (Taylor, 1992, p.370).

Skellington & Morris (1992) in a study conducted by the Commission for Racial Equality found that during the 1980's in England and Wales only 2.6% of all students on PGCE, final year B.Ed and other degree courses leading to qualified teacher status were from minority ethnic backgrounds, though individual universities differed in the proportion of ethnic minority students that they have.

It can also be suggested that minority ethnic groups suffer from indirect discrimination within the education system. Minority ethnic students are more likely than white students to come from social classes III and IV which themselves affect the area of domicile and the education received up to school leaving age. Cumulatively, these factors play an influential role in determining which institutions of higher education minority ethnic students apply to and are accepted into. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) suggested that minority ethnic students are more likely to apply to local institutions than white students, especially if their local institution has a high minority ethnic student population. The 'white', middle class

image of universities may deter minority ethnic students from applying to these institutions.

“This may reflect a positive decision by these students to attend institutions that they perceive as more diverse, more multi-racial, and more access ‘friendly, as well as being nearer family and other support networks” (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, July 1997, p.7).

It is not only factors related to pre-entry application procedures and types of courses studied which are important to understanding the experiences and choices of minority ethnic students in higher education. The manner in which a course curriculum is written, and how it is delivered, is not seen as a major cause for concern through education literature in relation to minority ethnic students' experiences of higher education. Bird (1996), however, argued that any curriculum should empower students to develop themselves through their studies by using where possible their own experiences. Minority ethnic students find this impossible to do due to the curriculum not relating to their experiences or their histories. Consequently, "the potential for indirect discrimination may be very great" (p.72).

Developing an understanding of issues relating to minority ethnic students could improve the relationship between staff and minority ethnic students and broaden the content and the methods through which a course or module is taught. A course curriculum includes not only the content a student must learn but also the delivery of that content, the use of assessments and interaction with other students, all of which are part of the learning process. As Bird (1996) notes,

"Given that the majority of interaction for students is with other students, both in and outside classes, then the need for work with students is perhaps greater than for that with staff" (p.74).

Bird (1996) found it surprising that ethnic monitoring is not a priority in higher education institutions for without it how can quality assessors evaluate the progression and experiences of minority ethnic students? Bird (1996) argues that,

"monitoring...is an essential aspect of the monitoring of the quality of the student experience and that assumptions cannot be made that all the diverse groups entering higher education institutions are receiving education of the same quality" (p.91).

Without effective monitoring of all ethnic groups in higher education, direct or indirect discrimination will be allowed to continue which affects the experiences of



students from all ethnic groups. Singh (1990) puts forward seven possible areas through which discrimination against minority ethnic students can occur. Discrimination firstly can arise through the selection process itself. Secondly, discrimination can arise from the expectation that all applicants to higher education should enter with the traditional qualifications, i.e. A levels. Thirdly, discrimination can arise from the requirement that students provide personal information on application forms in relation to their hobbies/interests. Fourthly, discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, can arise in the marking of assessments. Fifthly, discrimination can be experienced whilst on work placements or work experiences as part of the course being studied. Sixthly, discrimination can arise where racist groups exist amongst the student population. Finally, discrimination can arise from the lack of interest and the lack of implemented equal opportunity policies in institutions of higher education. Consequently,

"This means that both simple counting of students and any analysis which looks only at entry to and exit from university or college are inadequate" (Bird, 1996, p.92).

It is important to take account of these wider social factors and how such factors can influence an individual's route into higher education, especially for minority ethnic applicants. The underachievement of certain minority ethnic groups in schools and further education, the predominance of minority ethnic groups in the lower social class groups, alongside the lower standards of educational provision within inner city areas, are all influential factors which can determine the pathways which minority ethnic students are most likely to follow into higher education. Though explanations for unequal access into higher education must be developed, racial discrimination should not be ignored.

### **3.5 Summary of Students' Structural and Social Positions**

Students' social structural positions (social class, gender, ethnicity), ages and related phenomena along with access routes into higher education are all influential on students' experiences of higher education. Moreover, these factors are often inter-linked and mutually influential upon each other. Social class has long been a predictor of educational attainment. Though this is important to recognise, this research also focuses on the impact social class has on the choices and experiences of students

entering into and studying within higher education. By considering issues such as access to social, economic, cultural and emotional resources (Allatt, 1993), social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) that students possess and profess on entering higher education, the impact of social class on students' choices and experiences can be examined and theorised.

Social class can be related to the ages of students on entry to higher education. Debates surrounding the increasing number of mature students suggest an association between missed educational opportunities at a younger age (Britton & Baxter, 1999) and the opportunities and constraints social class (particularly working class) can place on an individual at different stages of life. The ages of students, the different access routes students follow into higher education (Thombs, 1997), the reasons why students enter higher education (Newstead et al, 1997), and the variety of experiences of students within different age groups due to academic and non-academic commitments (Kenyon, 1997; Woodley et al, 1987) are all inter-related and can affect the choices and decisions students make.

This research recognises too that gender is socially constrained but not socially determined, and in turn places opportunities and constraints on students' choices and experiences of higher education in relation to their gender, their social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1993) Studies have suggested that women and men enter higher education for different reasons (Pascall & Cox, 1993; Britton & Baxter, 1999) and that when in higher education students have different experiences affected partly by their gender roles. The experiences of mature women and men in higher education, for example, can be affected to differing degrees by dependants, particularly children (Leonard, 1994) which traditional 18 year old students may not experience. The reasons why women 'choose' particular subjects to study and the careers that follow are also of interest to this research and with gradual changes in social and gender roles of women and men this can lead to changes in experiences and life opportunities.

Though minority-ethnic students are considered to be over-represented in higher education, (Modood, 1992; 1993) concern focuses on the higher rate of minority



ethnic students applying to and studying within the 'new' universities compared to the old traditional universities. Influential factors too such as the type of course applied for (Taylor, 1992), the social class and educational backgrounds and the middle class, white image of universities (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) may all affect which universities minority ethnic students apply to study in. It is important to consider how these factors alongside their social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) can affect the experiences of minority ethnic students in higher education.

It was considered important to this research to not only examine the social and structural positions of students in higher education, but also the academic factors which impinge on the experiences of students. Chapter 4 addresses the academic issues relevant to this research. The students' experiences of learning, and in particular their experiences of modularity, are important when considering their academic experiences of higher education. Alongside the learning aspects within higher education, students face other issues such as finance and accommodation, for which they have to make choices dependent on their current positions. Though finance and accommodation are not the direct responsibility of higher education institutions, they are issues that are undoubtedly experienced to varying degrees by all students. Within current debates financial support and where students live during their studies, are both recognised as influential factors on the student experience, and were, therefore, considered important to this research in understanding the whole student experience.

## Chapter 4: Students' Experiences Within Higher Education

Whilst the previous chapter considered the 'structural factors' affecting access to higher education, the experiences of higher education and learning itself have to be considered in relation to the differential circumstances, needs and experiences of students. This chapter consequently considers the main factors that influence students' experiences within the university in the study, such as learning styles and modularity, financial support and issues, and type of accommodation whilst studying. All of these areas are discussed in relation to their impact on the students' experience and decision-making processes.

### 4.1 Learning Experiences and Modularity

Brown et al (1997), in response to the question 'what is learning' say that,

"In essence, learning may be defined as changes in knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes brought about by experience and reflection upon that experience. The experience may be structured, as in courses and learning packages, or it may be unstructured as in browsing or casual learning from peers" (p.21).

Though this definition may be contentious it is used because of the emphasis upon 'experience'. The notion of learning by which knowledge and perspectives are 'transmitted' to students reflects an input-output approach measured by the number of students and the levels of degrees obtained. The learning process, whilst studying in higher education, is complex and interacts with macro, meso and micro factors.

Packwood and Sinclair (1995) suggest that higher education should re-examine the nature of educational provision. Staff-student ratios, issues of accountability in relation to learning and the access routes and learning skills that students from different backgrounds bring or do not bring into higher education, all need to be considered. Packwood and Sinclair (1995) went on to propose that,

"the student body of the future will be more heterogeneous in character due to new policies that afford entry to increasingly modularised flexible degree structures through a diversity of access routes. Institutions will therefore be faced with classes which may consist of a wide age range, diverse previous experiences and reasons for being in HE" (p.217).

It is not only how students learn which is important to understand but also why students 'choose' to learn and enter higher education. Beaty et al (1997) argue that



students enter higher education for different reasons. Students may choose to learn ‘for its own sake’ or as an instrumental process to develop knowledge and skills in relation to a chosen career. They too acknowledge that students’ reasons for entering higher education can also be affected by external pressures.

“For many students, however, their own reasons for joining the university are affected by outside pressures from, for example, family, school or employment. Then, students must discover what it is possible to gain from the experience of higher education and how to study in order to achieve their own, individual goals” (Beaty et al, 1997, p.72).

Beaty et al (1997) interviewed students from the Open University and Surrey University in an attempt to understand student learning in relation to orientation, approaches and conceptions of learning. Beaty et al (1997) found that students explained their learning under a number of different categories such as; understanding the course content; personal and affective aspects of study; gaining confidence; changing attitudes; and increasing awareness and scepticism. Evans and Abbott (1995) also examined students’ perceptions of their learning within higher education and suggested that students’ perceptions are,

“influenced by individual personal needs, reflecting values held and incorporating consideration of issues such as course requirements, their own expectations, future careers ambitions and interpersonal relations” (p.192).

Evans and Abbott (1995) identified five learning related needs of students within higher education, these being; receiving the appropriate information; to acquire specific knowledge, skills and experience; to utilise knowledge, skills and experience; to successfully complete course assessments; to gain a degree. All five needs within learning were found to be common within their student sample. The five needs identified, however, were differentially interpreted according to degree course requirements. Consequently, it can be expected that variations can be found between different subjects as well as between the students themselves studying the same course.

#### **4.1.1 Modularity as a Programme of Learning**

Modular courses normally provide a designated number of core modules taken in conjunction with a number of optional modules, which may or may not be academically related. As a system of learning, modularity divides study into smaller, and to varying degrees, separate units. Students thus are often able to ‘choose’ their

modules on the basis of their relevance to their academic and personal goals. It is the choices of students that constitute their modular programme of study. MacWhannel (1994) consequently suggests that modularisation,

“allows the students to package a chosen route of study and gives for greater flexibility and choice within that route” (p.179).

In theory, modular course design potentially develops students’ capabilities and learning ‘outcomes’ in three main areas. Firstly, modular course content and design may enhance achievement in subject-specific outcomes, which refers to the specific academic subject content and knowledge that a student acquires and develops. Secondly, modules may enhance what are often called personal transferable skills such as communication, IT, and problem-solving. Thirdly, curriculum design and content may affect what are called the generic learning outcomes, those non-subject specific skills and knowledge that students must gain, and a level they must achieve at the end of a programme of study (Jenkins & Walker, 1994). These ‘skills’ are important not only to the learning process but also to the marketplace and may be beneficial to students when applying for positions in the workplace. All three categories of outcome potentially imply differential outcomes and achievements by students. Another feature of modular provision is the credit rating of modules that allows students to build up or accumulate credits towards their degree. Each successfully completed module gains a prescribed number of credits. Regulations normally require students to achieve a required number of credits to obtain their degree.

Students participate in ‘learning programmes’ in which they have to make decisions in relation to their own pattern of modules. Within modules, they are expected to take some responsibility for their own learning (Barnett, 1992). Consequently, it can be argued that,

“The purpose of a university education is thus about developing general qualities of a personal and social kind as well as those of an intellectual kind. It encompasses outcomes including communication skills, problem-solving abilities, interpersonal skills, planning and strategic thinking abilities and critical and evaluative skills, including logic” (Nightingale & O’Neil, 1997, p.53).

Bamford and Goodfellow (1996) suggest that, though modular courses increase student choice, the degree of choice can be limited by intra and inter-schemes, pre-



requisites and co-requisites. Intra-scheme choices refer to the available options to students within their major subject. Inter-scheme choice however, refers to the available 'free' options, being modules from other subjects not necessarily linked to a student's major subject. The intra and inter-scheme choices themselves can be determined also by pre-requisites and co-requisites, which require the completion or understanding of other modules in order to complete chosen modules and routes to awards. Bamford and Goodfellow (1996) go on to suggest that,

"Prerequisites and co-requisites are key constraining influences and their specification is a function of the culture of the organisation and of individual subject disciplines" (p.50).

Though in theory modularity provides students with a greater degree of choice over their learning programme, in practice it is questionable as to whether the expansion of choice is an accurate picture. This is not to say that the modular system is inefficient. Instead modularity recognises the difficulties of study and becomes another constraint that can influence and structure students' choices.

Students have a range of external constraints too experienced as commitments, such as families or employment, which can affect which modules they choose. Bamford and Goodfellow (1996) support this view and suggest that module choice may be,

"subject to timetabling constraints which restrict the ability of students to select modules, due to timetable clashes or inter-site travel" (p.51).

Both timetable constraints and inter-site travel are relevant to this study as the University being studied is a multi-site institution. There is a need thus to examine the freedom with which students are allowed to choose their own particular route of study and whether programmes provide them with sufficient flexibility and choice (MacWhannell, 1994).

#### **4.1.2 Information Provision within the University**

Bamford & Goodfellow (1996) suggest that modular programmes of study are beneficial to students only if the students are able to make informed choices and decisions based upon informative guidance systems, that include "guidance on changing individual modules, subjects / pathways or institution" (p.54). To increase student 'choice', a system that provides the necessary and relevant information and support for student needs to be in operation. Students who avail themselves of the

service may then be enabled to make relatively informed choices. Bamford & Goodfellow (1996) go on to suggest that, within the developing area of student learning, flexibility and choice, the issue of student guidance is paid little or no attention. Institutions introducing or maintaining modular courses need to recognise that student guidance is needed as part of not only the learning structure but also as an advice system within the student population.

“Guidance can be viewed along a continuum which commences at the scheme design stage, where significant ‘empowering’ and ‘constraining’ decisions are made, and progress to embrace support for students’ scheme/subject selection and programme construction, in-programme guidance, through to exit guidance” (Bamford & Goodfellow, 1996, p.49).

It is not only the characteristics of modular courses and the levels of information provision within institutions of higher education but also the characteristics of the student population that have to be taken into account. Increasing variations within the student population and student ‘types’ increases the need and demand for student support and guidance systems in relation to individual decision-making processes and students’ choices. Bamford & Goodfellow (1996) assert that,

“Traditionally the undergraduate population of universities has been dominated by school and college leavers with relatively independent lifestyles, subject to varying levels of parental financial support, studying on a full-time basis. The needs of this group contrasts markedly with those of the growing number of mature students who frequently bring with them financial, domestic and other commitments and responsibilities which influence and constrain their ability to study” (p.51).

As we have already noted, students make decisions based on their own personal perspectives, situations and commitments in both their academic and non-academic lives.

#### **4.1.3 Impact of Assessments on Students’ Learning**

A range of factors internal to universities related to students’ learning experiences within higher education have to be examined. Assessment methods, for instance, are important factors in analysing student experiences and development within a learning environment. This is especially so on a modular programme of study, for the variety of assessments are a major characteristic of a learning outcomes approach (Vaughan & Woolf, 1994). Boud (1995) argues that it is important to examine how students interpret assessment methods and how these,



“are embedded within the total context of the subject and within the total experience of the course and of university life...perceptions and interactions of a student are more important to learning than what staff take for granted as the ‘reality’ of the assessment” (p.38).

Brown et al (1997) suggest that, for instance, whilst multiple choice tests can result in reproductive styles of learning, assessments like project work can promote independence and deeper levels of understanding. The latter assessments may well provide better estimates of a student’s current status and achievements in higher education. Boud (1995) argues, however, that assessments do not provide sufficient feedback for students becoming simply a ‘task’ for the student to complete so that generally “assessment is led by the needs of summative judgement, not learning” (p.36).

Students are considered to adopt both ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ approaches to study while completing assessments depending on the nature of what each assessment requires (Boud, 1995). It is not only the value of such assessments that raises research concerns but also the amount of assessments used within programmes of study. Boud (1995) noted that,

“Students experience the interaction effects of one form of assessment on another. In any given month they may have to complete ten assessment tasks, in another month only one. The ways in which they approach each of these will be influenced by the others. A task which is intrinsically interesting and which may be approached meaningfully at any other time may be given short shrift when it is located among a thicket of examinations” (Boud, 1995, p.38).

Students may have to complete a number of assessments at any one time, giving rise to the ‘bunching’ of assessments, resulting in courses and / or modules being assignment driven which may reduce actual learning (Brown et al, 1997). A ‘bunching’ of assessments at certain times during the academic year (Leask in Jenkins & Walker (eds.), 1994) may lead to preferences for certain kinds of assessments that ‘pander to’ rather than ‘stretch’ student learning. It thus is important to analyse how assessment procedures are,

“embedded within the total context of the subject and within the total experience of the course and of university life” (Boud, 1995, p.38).

Brown et al (1997) suggest that it is more common now for learning to be continually assessed rather than courses due to the increase in modular programmes of study. At the same time many universities often do not consider overtly the implications that

modular programmes have for assessment methods and assessment loading at key times of modules.

#### 4.1.4 Records of Achievement

In many universities, students may also have the choice to keep a record of achievement or a 'profile', recording a summary of their progress and achievements (Trowler & Hinnett, 1994). Assiter & Shaw (1993) suggest that record of achievements can act as a 'learning contract', stating the intended outcomes of a programme of study, and are able to summarise the outcomes and attainments of students. Profiling (or Records of Achievement) is a,

“process of empowering students to be involved in the assessment, recording and reviewing of their own personal development and learning...students are encouraged to reflect on experience, to give and receive feedback, diagnose strengths and weaknesses and agree future learning targets and actions plans” (Assiter & Shaw, 1993, p.20).

The development and production of an end document or profile that represents academic and personal attributes of individual students is regarded as useful to not only the students but to potential employers. One of the main influences on the interest and completion of records of achievement in higher education is,

“the increasing focus, within HE, on skills and capabilities...communication, problem-solving and group work...RoAs have the potential for giving students real experience of being responsible and accountable for their own experience whilst on courses” (Assiter & Shaw, 1993, p.22).

Academics and students, especially in the new (post 1992) universities, are now focusing not only on knowledge but also the acquiring and developing skills, particularly 'transferable' skills. Increasing attention is being paid to the proposition that higher education has the ability to develop skills that are 'transferable' to areas outside of their programme of study. This notion that graduates gain certain skills through study that are beneficial within employment is not new (Holmes, 1995). Since the 1980's, however, past and present governmental arguments on the role of education in relation to improving the economy have increased the demand for, and awareness of, such skills. The needs of employers to employ skilled workers alongside the need of students to possess the skills employers demand has resulted in higher education developing students 'personal' and 'transferable' skills as part of their programmes of study.



“No longer are students assumed to be developing such abilities, almost incidentally to the subject-specific learning. Rather, novel approaches to teaching and assessment are to be used, whereby explicit attention is paid to the supposed transferable skills” (Holmes, 1995, p.21).

The design and implementation of modular courses, assessment procedures and workloads, development of skills and the use of record of achievement portfolios are influential on the learning experiences and choices of students in higher education.

## **4.2 Financial Aspects Whilst Studying in Higher Education**

In order to understand the changes in student financial support and the effects this has on students' experiences and the choices they make during their studies, it is important to recognise the personal funding changes introduced by successive Governments over the last forty years. The 1962 Student Act introduced means tested student maintenance grants and ensured the payment of tuition fees for all students. Consequently, state expenditure for students rose from 253 million pounds in 1962-3 to 829 million pounds in 1987-8 (McCarthy & Humphrey, 1995). Other state benefits too became part of a students income, so that,

"By 1987, seventy-seven per cent of students were in receipt of benefits and receiving an average amount of 249 pounds per annum. This conflicted with the Conservative government's aims of reducing state expenditure and encouraging independence and individual responsibility" (McCarthy & Humphrey, 1995, p.79).

Though it was the proposal of the Conservative Government (1979) to increase student participation in higher education, such a dramatic increase in expenditure as a result of the expansion was not anticipated or appreciated. This increase in expenditure acted as a catalyst to changes in student financial support.

Until 1984 students in higher education were entitled to a minimum maintenance grant of £410. This was abolished in 1985, leaving tuition fees as the only minimum award a student was entitled to. The Student Travel Costs Reimbursement was abolished during 1984 also. Two years later, in 1986, the Conservative Government abolished the Special Equipment Grant that allowed students on art, medicine and veterinary courses to claim for equipment essential to their studies.

Up to 1986, students were able to claim Supplementary Benefit (now known as Income Support) and Unemployment benefit during the Christmas, Easter and

summer vacations. Their right to claim benefits during Christmas and Easter vacations was abolished in 1986 though it was not until 1991 that their right to claim these benefits during the summer vacation was also abolished. Housing Benefit was withdrawn in 1986 for students in university halls of residence who had previously been entitled to claim what was termed 'rent rebates'. In 1990 rent rebates were also abolished for students in private sector accommodation. 1991 saw the abolition too of the Vacation Hardship Allowance that was made available to students in desperate financial need in relation to, for example, paying summer retention on their accommodation. In 1994 the additional 'Older Students Allowance' for mature students was abolished. In 1995 the Conservative government amended its previous policy of disallowing students claiming benefits during their vacations, to students being unable to claim any benefits at any time whilst still enrolled on a course even if time was being taken out of that course.

The most important change in student financial support was the freezing of the student maintenance grant and the introduction of the student loans system in 1990. The Conservative Government had attempted in 1988 to introduce student loans as a supplement to maintenance grants. Faced with opposition the Government did not implement the new system until 1990. Student maintenance grant levels were frozen in 1990 whilst in 1993 the Government announced that the student maintenance grant would be "cut progressively by 10% each year over 3 years from 1994/95 to 1996/97 and loans to be increased to compensate" (NUS, 1996a, p.5).

Students below the age of 25 years old when their course commences are not classed as independent students and thus are liable for financial support from their parents. The expectation of parents to provide financial support can cause severe difficulties. Not all parents can or will provide financial assistance making it difficult for some students to survive financially. Parents cannot by law be made to contribute financially, it is simply a matter of parent and child coming to an acceptable agreement in relation to how much they can or are willing to afford in financial support.



### 4.2.1 Student Grants

By 1995/96 the basic grant was £1,885 outside of London and £2,340 if studying in London. "This averages £48 per week (£60 in London) during the academic year and barely covers the costs of accommodation" (NUS, 1996b). The basic grant applied to a single person studying away from home with no other responsibilities or commitments. The student maintenance grant too was means tested. Students whose parental income at that time exceeded a joint income of £14,345 had their full grant reduced pro-rata. Students who are married too had their full grant entitlement reduced if their partner earned more than £11,350 per year (Deacon, 1994). Perhaps the most fundamental change to the cost of higher education for students, however, was the introduction of tuition fees in 1999.

"The introduction of a £1,000 annual tuition fee for all undergraduates, which represents about a quarter of the average cost of a higher education programme, is seen primarily as a way of reinforcing New Labour's underlying idea that individuals need to take more responsibility for their own learning and that those who benefit from education should also contribute financially towards it" (Hodgson & Spourse, 1999, p.103).

Deacon (1993) carried out a study within four higher education institutions in Wales in relation to student finance and debt levels. Deacon (1993) found that, whilst 48% of the students received no parental contribution, only 43% received a full grant. A further 5% of students were without any parental contribution. Parental contribution was also found to be an area of controversy by Leonard (1995) who studied 363 undergraduate Social Policy students and found that 54% of students did not receive the full grant. Of these students, 10% were not aware of how much their parents were expected to contribute towards their finances, and 46% were not receiving the amount needed. Consequently, "these deficiencies in the parental contribution have major financial implications for the economic survival of many students" (Leonard, 1995, p.233).

Taken together, these changes suggest that students, and especially mature students, effectively have been penalised through a number of grant and financial changes even though mature students are one of the 'target groups' for whom successive Governments aim to increase access for into higher education. Not only have mature students encountered the same changes as younger students such as a freezing of the grants system, the abolition of state assistance grants, and the implementation of

student loans and tuition fees, they have been denied the additional allowance for mature students, phased out following its abolition in 1994. Consequently,

"Having sacrificed more than the average teenager to become a student, the mature student has more financial obligations to meet and losses to suffer which have been exacerbated by the loss of entitlement to claim welfare benefits" (McGuire, 1991, p.48).

Students most likely to be affected by the lack of financial support are "older students who have given up jobs to study, unemployed adults, single parents and others with homes and families to support, part-time students, students with non-working partners" (McGivney, 1996, p.137). Mature female students with families often have to face the added pressure of finding childcare if they can afford to do so. Mature students are, therefore, most likely to find themselves 'juggling' their studies alongside outside commitments and taking on debts such as student loans.

#### 4.2.2 Student Loans

The Conservative Governments (1979-1994) argued that student loans would allow an expansion of higher education, reduce public expenditure on education, and make the minority who benefit from higher education at the expense of the average taxpayer more accountable and self-reliant. Their argument focused on the proposition that graduates receive higher earnings than the average taxpayer and consequently should not depend on the taxpayer to provide their 'privileged' education. Student loans were seen too as a way of those who would not otherwise be able to afford to study to enter higher education by allowing them to invest in their own futures.

Due to the uncertainty of obtaining well-paid employment, the introduction of student loans may discourage some students from low-income families to enter higher education due to the fear of debts (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). This may be applied also to mature students who have responsibilities and dependents. The risk of incurring debts may be a risk some students are not willing to take.

"If the loss of income from such changes had been compensated by the top-up loans then we could move on to the issues of student debts on graduation, abilities to repay loans and the effects on choices, career plans and disincentives to enter higher education" (Pilkington, 1994, p.58).



Not surprisingly, students consequently use a range of avenues to obtain and manage their finances. Major banks have facilities and accounts suitable for students and their financial situation. Interest free overdrafts, credit cards with lower interest rates and credit limits are examples of facilities available to students through banks. In 1995 the average amount which students were borrowing from their banks either in the form of loans or (in most cases) overdraft facilities was £264, a reduction when compared to the figure of £290 in 1993 (Barclays Bank, 1995). A number of explanations have been put forward to explain this reduction in bank overdraft limits such as an increase in parental contribution; part-time employment during term time; an increase in students remaining at home whilst studying; and an increase in the take-up rate of student loans. In effect,

"Students tend to pay off their overdraft with income from summer vacation jobs or add to the overdraft throughout their student life and then on commencing in employment pay off the overdraft, which by this time has become a loan" (McGuire, 1991, p.37).

Morgan (1997) agrees that students face many pressures and have to make many choices within higher education, some of which may have negative consequences and implications. Morgan (1997) suggests that many students,

"need to balance studying with part time work and they must compete against those who do not need to work and have more time to study and socialise" (p.43).

Leonard (1995) too accords with Morgan's (1997) argument and suggests that, though higher education is open to all who wish to participate, resources are not provided for particular groups who lack or have not got access to the necessary resources. Leonard (1995) argues that the lack of available resources reduces the level of educational opportunity and creates hurdles for some students to encounter in order to study within higher education.

#### **4.2.3 Employment**

Employment for many students is no longer an issue of additional income over necessary expenditure, but an essential fact of life. As we have noted above, students are facing a constant dilemma concerning the levels of debt they could find themselves in compared to the time loss and academic pressures employment can place on them during their studies.

Taylor (1998) conducted a survey into paid employment amongst students during the academic year 1995-1996. Taylor (1998) found that students were engaged in paid employment due to maintenance grants and maximum student loans not covering financial requirements. One quarter of the students worked in paid employment on weekends, whilst one in six worked on the evenings and one in ten students worked during weekdays. Most importantly, two thirds of all students who worked felt that it had a detrimental affect on their studies. As Deacon (1994) recognises,

"Another worry is that those students who are working may be neglecting their studies and as a result may suffer academically" (p.39).

Students in need thus have two choices. The first choice is whether to work, possibly to the detriment of their studies. Secondly, students have to decide whether or not to take out student loans and bank overdrafts and face a period of debt once their studies are completed. Neither case can be regarded as an appealing option. Despite this, Leonard (1995) suggests that the economic and financial conditions students find themselves in whilst studying in higher education creates a necessity to engage in paid employment during their study time.

#### **4.2.4 Debt**

Increasingly in large numbers of cases students complete their course only to face a number of years paying off their debts. In 1995 65% of students were resigned to being in debt compared with 50% of students in 1993. This suggested that, "students are becoming more accepting of debt as a feature of student life" (Barclays Report, 1995, p.2).

In their study of 1,921 Applied Social Research students in 1992/93, McCarthy and Humphrey (1995) found that debt levels were strongly related to year of study. 40% of first year, 60% of second year, and 80% of third year students in their sample had debts. Debt levels in their sample varied from no debts incurred to £6,665 with the average debt being £402.

"Thus debt is as much a part of student life as queuing in the canteen or taking exams...When it comes to a choice between buying 'that text book' or 'that meal' it is evident which is going to come first. The idea that students can devote their spare time to studying instead of seeking employment is fast becoming a thing of the past" (Deacon, 1994, p.44).



The diversity of income levels amongst students within higher education can create a variety of opportunities or constraints. This undoubtedly results in a wide range of educational experiences and choices due to finances being an influential factor on students' experiences and choices within higher education.

### **4.3 Types of Accommodation Whilst Studying in Higher Education**

Accommodation is the main financial expenditure and reason for incurring debts for the majority of students in higher education, especially those living away from home. Students face high rents not only in the private sector but also in the university halls of residence. In 1992/93 the average weekly rent was £34 (Pilkington, 1994) rising to £48.37 in institutional accommodation and £40.12 in private accommodation in 1996/97 (NUS, 1996b). Students too face housing contracts that do not charge for term time only. Instead, students have to accept contracts that are for a full twelve months, often resulting in students paying rent for vacation weeks during the Christmas and Easter recesses. This was confirmed by McCarthy & Humphrey (1997) who found that the costs of accommodation was the main financial outgoing for students, particularly due to the fact that,

“for three months in the year students are paying for accommodation which they do not need...students pay almost £500 per year more for housing than they would need if they could rent for nine months rather than twelve...accommodation is paid for which is generally not occupied between July and October” (p.57).

If a student wishes to remain in the same property the following year they will also face paying rent over the summer vacations whilst they may not be living in the accommodation. This can be a considerable constraint. Students consequently have to either pay the additional rent costs or face the constant changing of residence.

"As accommodation is a large part of student expenditure the difference between a 40+ weeks' contract (to cover short vacations) and a 31 weeks' (academic year only) contract has a significant impact on debt levels" (Pilkington, 1994, p.64).

In 1996/97 a student in receipt of a full grant with a student loan would live on £76.63 per week. If accommodation is taken out of this total in relation to those students living in institutional accommodation and those in private accommodation, students will spend 63% and 52% of their expenditure on rent (NUS, 1996b).

McCarthy and Humphrey (1995) further found significant differences in relation to accommodation costs and year of study, and argue,

"So long as demand for private sector housing is high, students will have no option but to meet the requirements set down by private landlords...evidence suggests that the amount they owe will increase rapidly once they get into their second and third years, unless they can remain in university housing or live at home" (McCarthy & Humphrey, 1995, p.85).

The poor standard of much student accommodation can have a negative effect on the health and ability of students to study within a suitable environment. McCarthy & Humphrey (1997) note again that,

"the shortage of university accommodation has forced greater numbers of students into poor conditions that can affect their health and their ability to study. The consequences of these unfavourable conditions are likely to include more young people staying in the parental home while they pursue their studies or choosing not to apply for, or take up, their university places" (p.55).

High rents for poor accommodation may be a sacrifice that many students are not willing to make thus resulting in more students deciding to remain in their home region and live with their families. McCarthy & Humphrey (1997) argue that financial issues and accommodation standards and costs create problems for students in higher education, and are,

"significant barriers to the development of open access to higher education...students getting into financial difficulties and experiencing housing problems could well be an increase in the numbers of young people who will be compelled to stay with their parents during their university careers. Alternatively, the prospect of debt and unsavoury housing conditions could deter a great many potential students, particularly those without substantial private means, from considering a university education at all" (p.62).

Morgan (1997) suggests that it is not only the standard of student accommodation that is an issue but also the fact that many students are becoming independent for the first time. They are learning how to cope independently, to pay bills and feed themselves. Students who move away from home also have the additional pressure of living in a new area and meeting new people. These changes are creating pressures on the parents and families of students, with the result that "fewer students being in a position to leave home and hence their dependency on their parents will increase rather than decrease" (Leonard, 1995, p.235). It is not the pressures placed specifically on the families of students within higher education, though this is important to the student experience, but on the students themselves. Consequently,



accommodation whilst studying within higher education that is of particular interest to this research.

#### **4.4 Summary of Students' Experiences of Higher Education**

The experiences of students within higher education are important to consider in conjunction with the prior social structural positions of students. Experiences within the university are taken primarily to relate to learning styles and modularity, financial support and accommodation, all of which are factors which all students experience but to various degrees of influence on their experiences. Higher education is a learning environment and it is how students manage their learning that is of interest to this research. The reasons why students 'choose' their modules and how they will use the knowledge and skills gained are important when examining students' orientations to learning (Beatty et al, 1997). Modular courses are of particular interest to this research in relation to the extent to which modularity enhances or places constraints upon students' choices and learning. Issues such as workload levels, assessment deadlines, time-table constraints, information provision, and maintaining records of achievement all contribute to the need for students to make choices and in effect influence or 'manage' their experiences.

The financial support received by students in higher education has been an important area of debate and concern due to its impact on the student experience. Changes made through successive governments have reduced the significance of a number of avenues through which students in higher education can gain financial support. This has resulted in more students being employed during term-time (Morgan, 1997) and higher levels of student debt through bank overdrafts, student loans and credit cards (Deacon, 1993). These factors can not only affect students' experiences and choices but can also deter some social groups from entering or continuing their studies due to financial implications (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998).

One of the major changes in students in higher education due to finance is the number of students remaining to live in their own home or their parents' home and studying at their local institution of higher education. The cost of accommodation can be very expensive for students who move away from home to study (Pilkington, 1994) and this alongside the reduction in financial support and the low standards of

student accommodation (McCarthy & Humphrey, 1997) can influence students' decisions to remain at home to study. The student experience, however, is associated with living away from home for the first time and being independent (Morgan, 1997) for traditional students though this may not apply to mature students. On what basis, therefore, do students make their decisions and choices? How do academic and non-academic factors influence the choices they make and their experiences of higher education?

All of the areas discussed in chapter 3 and chapter 4 are examined further through the research methodology (Chapter 5). An initial questionnaire examined the 'social positions' of students at the university, in terms of their personal characteristics and their past and current social and educational experiences and positions. By obtaining this information, the social and structural positions of students within higher education can be evaluated in relation to their perceived opportunities and constraints, and how these in turn can affect their educational opportunities, constraints and experiences. A series of focus group interviews and individual interviews have been conducted to develop and widen the information gained from the questionnaire survey. The qualitative data enabled the research to look deeper into the students' perceptions and interpretations of their own realities. The methodologies used for this research are discussed in Chapter 5.



## Chapter 5: Empirical Research Methodology

In order to understand the social world and choose the appropriate methodologies for the research project, three background factors have been considered: ontology, epistemology, and philosophy. These three considerations provide a basis on which to interpret and understand the social world, and the agency-structure relationship of the students, for,

“Systematic, theoretically based empirical research must be grounded in metatheoretical considerations of ontology and epistemology” (Friedman & Starr, 1997, p.141).

Ontology is concerned with the experiential realities of the individual, i.e. the agent. Ontology can be defined as the study of being – the nature and experience of reality by individuals and social groups. In essence, reality – the world external to any individual or social group, can be perceived as having an independent, ‘objective’ feel to it but can also be perceived as socially constructed, subjectively created as a result of the interactions of the actors. Often, these two positions can be held and experienced simultaneously, for though we may feel ourselves to be in the grip of forces beyond our control, and with which we ‘cope’ (as in coping strategies), we also often perceive room for manoeuvre, the capability of action (colonisation activities). In the context of the agency–structure debate, Friedman & Starr (1997) suggest that,

To understand the ontological agent-structure problem, the conceptualisation of agency is especially vital...agency is comprised of agency consciousness. Agency consciousness is a generative property of agency in the sense that it allows for agency choice. Together, consciousness and power of choice capture the core meaning of agency – the ability to interpret and the power to choose among not only different behavioural options, but also among different interests, identities, decision-making procedures, etc...agents are intentional beings” (p.11).

The concept of agents being ‘conscious’ within and of their own social realities led to this research project adopting research methods which involved direct evaluations by the subjects and their own statements and interpretations of their social realities. Due to time limitations and other constraints, no attempt was made to assess the veracity of those interpretations. Reality was taken to be what the respondents said it was, despite this possibly not being the case.

Epistemology is concerned with how individuals and social groups constitute and communicate knowledge. The concept of knowledge gained through experience or something that is acquired supports an ontological approach to the extent to which social reality is perceived as objective or subjective. Knowledge gained through experience is subjective, however, knowledge that is acquired (learned) and not experienced is considered to be objective, existing out there, and residing in records such as texts.

If knowledge is something that is external to an individual, and can be acquired, it is possible that social reality embodied in artefacts can be examined separate to the individual. If knowledge, however, is gained through the experiences of the individual and resides within them, social reality is a subjective phenomenon and understood only through the individual and their own interpretations. It was important, therefore, to be able to assess how the research samples in this study obtained and used information. As the students' experiences of higher education had not been codified and thus remained subjective, methodologies had to be adopted that would allow the samples to provide their own interpretations and understandings of their experiences. This was particularly so with the focus groups and the interviews with students reminiscent of student access types.

The research consequently combines ontology and epistemology and integrates the relationship between individuals and their environment, i.e. agency and structure.

“Suppositions concerning agency, structure, and their interrelationship bear directly upon the role of social structure in the construction, or reconstruction, of social structure” (Friedman & Starr, 1997, p.4).

A philosophical approach, however, questions the extent to which individuals respond mechanically to their environment or whether they are initiators of their own actions and, therefore, how agents and structures inter-link. This study adopted the interpretive approach that students in the main are initiators of their own actions, whether they are coping or colonising actions. The research, therefore, attempted to



understand how students understand the world, made choices, and on what basis they made decisions.

These three background issues had a direct impact on the methodological concerns of the researcher and the methodologies chosen for the research project. The researcher's approach to understanding contrasting ontologies, epistemologies and philosophies consequently played an important part in determining which research methods were used. The 'type' of data that was of interest to the research project was elicited through those methods that enabled such data to be obtained. Whilst it was important to collect and analyse 'objective' data as perceived by the students, such as social class, gender and ethnicity, a more significant objective was to collect and analyse the personal perspectives of the participants upon their experiences of higher education.

The overall aim of the research project was to explore and theoretically understand the experiences and decision-making processes of students within one particular institution of higher education. It was important, therefore, to relate the wider structural factors to the students' experiences, interpretations and perceptions of higher education and to consider the subjective components of their realities. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods thus was adopted to enable an exploration of the experiences of a large number of students in higher education. The empirical research project consequently was conducted in three stages.

Stage 1: The development, implementation and analysis of a questionnaire to provide data in relation to; personal characteristics and backgrounds; previous education and access routes followed into higher education; reasons for entering higher education; reasons for choosing the university; experiences of studying on a modular course; financial and accommodation experiences. This data was gained to supplement and extend data and perspectives currently available to the project (Thombs, 1997) and in the literature review.

Stage 2: The utilisation of a series of focus groups which provided qualitative data from samples of education students representative of particular education awards in relation to their decision-making within the university in areas such as; preparedness for higher education; information used to choose university; their expectations of higher education; preferred learning experiences and module choices; information provision and support; and wider personal/contextual factors such as dependents, finance, accommodation and employment issues insofar as they affect the higher education experience.

Stage 3: The development and implementation of semi-structured interview schedules that obtained personal ethnographic biographical data perspectives from representative student 'access types' (Thombs, 1997) about key decision points, influential factors on their higher education experience, and their personal perspectives of higher education. Each interview particularly focused on the experiences and the decision-making processes of specific individual student 'types', the reasons for the 'path' they chose and their educational experiences in higher education.

A discussion shall be provided in this chapter in relation to the three specified methodological procedures and considerations.

### **5.1 Methodological Framework**

At the time the research began, a limited amount of research had been conducted into how students achieve and experience learning within higher education. Fleming's (1995) concept of 'situated action' was used to understand how students' everyday practices affect or impinge on their educational experiences. Ribbens & Edwards (1998) suggest that,

"in exploring this sphere as researchers, we find ourselves placed at the edges, between public social knowledge and private lived experiences" (p.2).

The interplay of both 'public' and 'private' spheres helps to construct the experiences, choices, and pathways of students in higher education. While recognising the



centrality of the influence of the meso structure (institutional) on student experiences, it is important to recognise the micro (face-to-face interaction) and macro influences (wider social structural) and the impact these have. By recognising the importance of the private and the public worlds of individuals within particular social settings, an understanding can be developed into how and why individuals choose certain paths and how their experiences affect their decision-making processes. As Ribbens & Edwards (1998) argue,

“the concepts of both ‘public’ and ‘private’ share the fact that they appertain to *social* lives and social settings, in the sense that they refer directly to interactions between people. The public we have already characterised as more goal-orientated and individualistic in its overt value system, and its way of being and knowing. The private we have characterised as more process-orientated and connected in its value system, and its way of being and knowing” (p.14).

Bhaskar’s (1979) theory of ‘transcendental realism’ supports the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Bhaskar (1979) argued that individuals and ‘society’ conceptually are separate entities. Society, however, cannot exist without human interaction and activity, and is subsequently perpetuated and transformed by it. Social structures can also be perpetuated and transformed by human activity, and are, therefore, not fixed entities, and though social structures may influence individuals’ lives, they do not determine them. Bhaskar’s (1979) theory, therefore, recognised the influence social structures have on individuals’ lives, but also recognises that individuals’ lives are not socially predetermined. The relationship between structure and agency requires an understanding to be developed through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Both of these approaches obtain different ‘types’ of information that can be complementary to each other. It was decided, therefore, to use both quantitative and qualitative methods for this research.

## 5.2 A Case Study

This research is also a case study of Education students in one particular West Midlands ‘new’ university (post-1992). Case studies are a useful method in attempting to illustrate the ‘social construction of reality’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), and can create an understanding of how a particular group of individuals organise their world and make choices based on past, present and future influences, experiences and

expectations. Case studies can allow a researcher to examine how individuals understand and navigate their way through the 'here and now'. For this research, therefore, a case study was an appropriate method to examine the experiences of particular cohorts of students within Education within one institution of higher education in relation to their experiences and choices within the institution.

A case study process usually involves a number of stages, though the stages may vary between different studies. Bassey (1999) defined seven stages through which a case study can be carried out. The first six stages shall be discussed briefly to provide a clear outline of the case study process used for this particular research. The research area firstly has to be defined and considered to be worth exploration, to have a purpose and enable new findings and understandings to be presented to a wider audience. This stage requires the appropriate research questions to be asked. Research questions secondly need to be formulated, specifying which data is to be collected followed by analysis, all conducted within boundaries of space and time. Thirdly, the data has to be collected through whichever research method is considered to be most appropriate to the case study. On this matter, Bassey (1999) argues that,

“Case study research has no specific methods of data collection or of analysis which are unique to it as a method of enquiry. It is eclectic and in preparing a case study researchers use whatever methods seem to them to be appropriate and practical” (p.69).

The fourth stage involves the generating and testing of the raw data that is obtained, to attempt to create an understanding of the data and construct meaningful statements. Fifthly, the data needs to be analysed to create and “understanding of the way things are” (p.71). Bassey (1999) notes that the interpretation of data involves relationships between individuals or particular groups of individuals with particular phenomenon. Data interpretation involves an attempt to understand and explain the nature of any relationships found in the data. The sixth stage, and final stage relevant to this research, highlights the outcome of the case study, and the basis on which any report shall be written, i.e. theory-testing, evaluation, or story-telling (the importance of validity and reliability within case study research is discussed in section 5.7).



The case study process outlined above is one that is appropriate for this research. The topic, i.e. students in higher education, was considered to be a viable area of research due to the changing nature of higher education and those who study within it. The areas of interest were, therefore outlined, and the appropriate questions were asked through the quantitative and qualitative research methods. The data was analysed through a range of techniques suited to quantitative and alternatively qualitative methods, allowing both statistical data and more in-depth statements to be collated. Due to the theoretical nature of this research, it has been written within a theory-developing framework.

### **5.3 The Samples in the Research**

The samples used for both the quantitative and the qualitative methods of research within this study were all obtained through the same techniques. It was decided, therefore, to discuss the samples as a whole for all three stages of research instead of separately. The samples from the three research stages and subsequently methods, consisted of the following numbers: questionnaire survey (194); focus group interviews (22); access route interviews (9).

The research focus was the experiences and decision-making processes of students within the Faculty of Education at one post-1992 university. This both limited and specified which part of the student population would be used as the research sample, i.e. students studying Education courses. Four courses within the Faculty of Education at the University were used as part of the sample for all three of the research stages. Three lead to qualifications in teacher training whilst the fourth leads to a combined honours qualification in Education studies. These four courses are listed below along with brief details of each.

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>B.Ed Primary:</b> | A full-time course of four years that qualifies students to teach in the primary school sector. There are three main elements; Specialist Subject Studies; Applied Subject Studies; and Supervised Teaching Experience in schools. |
|----------------------|--|

**B.Ed Secondary:** A full time course of four years that qualifies students to teach in the secondary school sector. Students specialise in one of four areas of Design and Technology, Business Studies, Mathematics, and Languages.

**BA Secondary:** A full time course of two years for mature students (above the age of 21 years) that qualifies successful students to teach in the secondary school sector. Students specialise in one of four areas of Design and Technology, Business Studies, Mathematic, and Languages.

### **Modular Degree**

**and Diploma Scheme:** A full time course of three years where students in choosing which modules to study, study Education module as a single, major or joint subject (75%, 60%, 50% of course total number of modules).

Before discussing the sampling methods used for this study, an outline of the total samples by course is provided in table 5.1 below.

**Table 5.1: All Sample by Course**

| <b>Course</b>           | <b>Questionnaire Survey<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Focus Groups<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Interviews<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Total<br/>(no.)</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>B.Ed Primary</b>     | 68                                    | 7                             | 4                           | 79                     |
| <b>B.Ed Secondary</b>   | 8                                     | 3                             | 0                           | 11                     |
| <b>BA Secondary</b>     | 34                                    | 3                             | 2                           | 39                     |
| <b>Combined Studies</b> | 76                                    | 6                             | 3                           | 85                     |
| <b>No answer</b>        | 8                                     | 0                             | 0                           | 8                      |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>194</b>                            | <b>19</b>                     | <b>9</b>                    | <b>222</b>             |

A sample population is designed, as far as possible, to represent the population as a whole. It is important to consider which characteristics of the whole population are significant so as to ensure that the sample population too hold these characteristics in order to ensure representation.



“The focus of the researcher’s interest is not the sample but the population it represents...researchers are interested in what the sample can tell them about the population” (Whip, R. in (ed.) Lupton, G. et al, 1992. p.47).

Shipman (1997) argues that sample choice depends on the aims of the research and the resources available to the research. By considering these two factors it was possible to decide which type of sample method best suits the research project. Similarly, Shipman (1997) argues that there is no superior or preferred way of sampling. Instead it is more a case of understanding and explaining why the sample was chosen in relation to the research interests and outcomes.

“A lot of research is not aimed at generalization, but at understanding the way we live together in specific circumstances, at trying out new methods, at developing theory...what is always necessary is to give the reader enough detail to ‘see’ the sample or cases and why and how they were chosen” (Shipman, 1997, p.60).

Due to the sample student population specifically studying within Education, how to access these students too had to be considered. Methods such as simple random sampling (choosing randomly from a list of names within the sample population), cluster sampling (sample widely dispersed requiring a smaller selection to represent whole sample population), or snowball sampling (identify a small number of sample who provide contact with relevant others of similar characteristics) were all considered inappropriate for this research. Obtaining a list of all students within Education (simple random sampling) and choosing names from that list would have been too time consuming too as each student would have to be individually contacted and arrangements made. The sample was not widely dispersed (cluster sampling), but was based either permanently or at specific times at one campus of the university. Due to time limitations, snowball sampling too was considered to be too time consuming to be used for this research.

The sample was ‘stratified’ to the degree that only students from all of the four courses were included in all three stages of the research, with only first and second year students included in stage 1, and final year students in stages two and three. Due to the course requirements for the students and the temporary absences from the university due to teaching placements, access to the whole student sample was

limited. The student sample was obtained purely on an “opportunistic” basis and depended upon access being granted by lecturers who taught the relevant students at times convenient to them and the students. Black (1996) uses the term ‘convenience’ or ‘volunteer’ sampling when a researcher uses a group of individuals that are available, suggesting that,

“It is very difficult, if not impossible, to justify that such a group is truly representative of a larger population, no matter what its size” (p.50).

This raises concerns around the value of being able to generalise results. Black (1996) argued, however, that small scale ‘convenience’ samples “can provide valuable insights and understanding” (p.55), and that both small-scale in-depth studies and large representative studies can have a degree of ‘generalisability’ particularly where the results resonate with other similar research studies such as those contained on chapter 4. Black (1996) argued that researchers rarely “have the resources to study comprehensively an issue as thoroughly as they would like” (p.56), and that it is important, therefore, to ensure the necessary ‘links’ are made within the literature search. The areas of interest in the literature review provided a basis of comparison throughout the research process for this study.

To gain information in relation to the students’ backgrounds and educational and non-educational ‘paths’, it was decided that a questionnaire survey would provide the necessary data in a statistical format to enable data analysis to be carried out in conjunction with, and to support, the qualitative element of the study.

#### **5.4 Quantitative Method: Questionnaire Survey**

The questionnaire was written and designed as the first stage of the research and within a framework of the main objectives which were as follows:

- To gain data which can be compared and contrasted to data previously gained.  
(Thombs 1997)
- To obtain data to support the research outcomes of the project (see 1.1 above).



The aim of the questionnaire (see appendix 1) was to critically examine the 'types' of students entering higher education, more specifically the School of Education at the university. The previous educational experiences of the students alongside their current experiences of higher education were examined.

#### 5.4.1 Pilot Study of the Questionnaire

Any pilot study should be conducted, as far as possible, with individuals who resemble or represent the type of individuals in the research sample. De Vaus (1996) suggests that,

“Depending on the content of the questionnaire, it will be important to match particular characteristics of the pilot and final samples...Naturally, the closer the match between the pilot sample and the final sample, the better” (p.103).

The pilot study was carried out in January 1997 and consisted of fifteen first year Education students who were selected at random in the University refectory. The pilot sample too was, therefore, an 'opportunistic' sample. The students were approached by the researcher and asked which course they were studying and year of study to ensure they were first year Education students. They were then asked whether or not they would be willing to co-operate and participate in the pilot study of the questionnaire survey. Once co-operation was established, the researcher explained the nature of the research project and the intentions of the pilot study.

The aim of the pilot study was to minimise the limitations and possible inadequacies of the questionnaire survey, through pilot study evaluation and testing. The pilot study allowed the questionnaire to be tested for irrelevant questions and uninterpretable results. Oppenheim (1998) argues that,

“It is essential to pilot every question, every question sequence, every inventory and every scale in your study...take nothing for granted. Pilot the question lay-out on the page, pilot the instructions given to the respondents, pilot the answer categories, pilot even the question-numbering system” (p.49).

The questionnaire was piloted to ensure that: questions were worded in a precise manner; questions were understandable to the respondent; the questionnaire structure was clear and easy to follow; questionnaire was not too long and time consuming to

complete. The researcher was present to enable the students to verbally comment as they completed the questionnaire. The comments provided by the students in relation to the questionnaire content and structure, were recorded by the researcher to ensure that the relevant changes to the questionnaire were made. The students were also timed to assess how long it would take the student sample to complete the questionnaire.

The pilot study revealed minimal changes to be made to the questionnaire. The time taken to complete the questionnaire varied between students with some students completing the questionnaire in 25 minutes and others taking up to one hour. As a result of the pilot study the wording of two questions were changed and the order of three questions was changed. Overall the response from the students who participated in the pilot study was positive, expressing that the questionnaire was well structured, easy to understand and interesting. Once the pilot study was completed and the necessary changes were made to the questionnaire, the questionnaire survey could be conducted.

#### **5.4.2 Completion of Questionnaires**

The questionnaire survey was carried out between January to May 1997. Due to the time limitations and the number of questionnaires to be completed it was considered that students should be contacted in groups to enable large numbers of questionnaires to be completed at each session. In order to gain access to large groups of students, lecturers who taught education modules were sent letters and asked for their co-operation. The researcher requested permission to enter taught lectures in order to meet the students and complete the questionnaires. Thirty minutes was requested at the beginning or the end of each taught session for the students to complete the questionnaires. Access to the students and completion of the questionnaire survey depended upon three main factors; the response rate of lecturers to allow access to students; the number of students present in each group/lesson; the agreement of the students to participate in research and complete the questionnaires. A total of 194 questionnaires were self-completed by first and second year Education students.



Before completing the questionnaires the researcher briefly spoke to the students in order to ensure that the students understood the following.

- The nature and interests of the research.
- To ask the students for their participation in the research.
- To explain the questionnaire layout and how to complete the questionnaire.
- To inform the students of the thirty minutes allowed for completion of the questionnaire.
- To inform students that the researcher shall remain present and that they may ask questions if any queries arise.
- To make students aware that it is their right to withhold any information and that the information they provide shall remain confidential.

After explaining the above points the students completed the questionnaire with few difficulties. No student refused to participate in the research and only one student withheld information (related to financial situation) they considered to be “too personal”. The researcher remained present while the students self-completed the questionnaires. This ensured that any queries or questions the students had could be answered directly and quickly. A few students asked questions to be made clearer to them though no specific question posed any problem throughout the research. The majority of students completed the questionnaire with no help or difficulties. Once completed the questionnaires were immediately handed back to the researcher.

Once the questionnaires were completed each answer was coded using the coding structure that was devised on each questionnaire and placed within a database using an Optimal Mark reader that allowed the data to be analysed.

#### **5.4.3 Questionnaire: Data Analysis**

The questionnaire was written and devised to obtain quantitative data and some qualitative data. It was decided to conduct data analysis using a SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) spreadsheet and database.

The design and layout of the questionnaire was completed in a format that allowed the data to be read by an Optical Mark Reader (OMR). This format required the respondents to place a horizontal line in a box that was situated next to their chosen answer. This method of answering enabled the answers to be scanned and the OMR to record the codes attached to each value (answer) by recognising the boxes that had a line drawn inside and those which did not.

Once each questionnaire had been scanned by the OMR and the data read onto a spreadsheet, the spreadsheet was transferred into an SPSS database package to enable the data to be analysed. The database initially showed the codes (numbers) that represented each answer. SPSS, however, enables the researcher to define all of the variable labels (questions) and the value labels (answers) so that data is produced in an alpha-numerical format instead of just a numerical format. The example provided below represents the process called pre-coding, whereby possible answers are listed for the respondents to choose from. Pre-coding is suitable for closed-ended questions.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Question:       | How would you rate the standard of your accommodation?                                 |
| Variable Label: | ACCOM  |
| Value Labels:   | (1) Very Good<br>(2) Good<br>(3) Average<br>(4) Poor<br>(5) Very Poor<br>(6) No answer |

By attaching the variable (e.g. ACCOM) and value labels (e.g. Very good) the data was produced giving a name to each variable and each value. The data was analysed by examining the relationship between independent and dependent variables, that is, which variables (independent) appear to affect other variables (dependent). This enabled the researcher to analyse the quantitative data and produce tables and charts to represent the findings and the areas of interest to the research project.



The questionnaire also included open-ended questions. The respondent is asked for an individual written answer and not offered a list of possible answers to choose from. This process involves the answers being post-coded once all of the questionnaires are completed and the range of answers provided. An example is given below.

Question 35: If yes, what do you feel you have gained in terms of knowledge and skills? Please explain your answer as fully as possible.

For open-ended questions the researcher listed all of the answers provided and, using an open coding approach, produced a coding structure which represented the variety of answers given by all of the respondents. Three questions were open-ended questions and had to be post-coded by the researcher. All the other questions were pre-coded. The data from the questionnaire is provided and considered in chapters 6-10 below.

### **5.5 Qualitative Method: Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews can be used as a research method which can precede quantitative methods, used at the same time as quantitative methods (triangulation), follow quantitative methods, or be used as a method on its own. Focus groups were used in this particular research following the questionnaire survey in order to provide a clearer and deeper understanding of the quantitative data already obtained. As Krueger (1994) argues,

“Questionnaires typically yield a sizeable amount of data, and focused interviews can provide insights about the meaning and interpretation of the results” (p.30).

Morgan (1998) described focus groups as follows,

“Focus groups are group interviews. A moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. What the participants in the group say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups” (p.1).

Focus groups examine and explore the perceptions, opinions, attitudes and experiences of a group of people.

“In particular the method is used to encourage self-disclosure among participants in order to generate qualitative data which researchers may later analyse”(Wilson, 1997, p.209).

Both the focus and the content of the focus group interview rests with the interviewer or the researcher though the data obtained arises from the participants. In order to encourage an in-depth discussion of the relevant issues it is important for the researcher to provide a non-threatening and comfortable environment for the participants and not to make the questions too personal as this may limit the degree of openness from the participants. The approach was,

“with small, moderated groups of acquaintances for the purpose of understanding and interpreting their experiences” (Wilson, 1997, p.216).

Four focus groups were conducted with students from the four courses used within this study. The focus groups were conducted during June 1998 with final year students. The numbers of students for each focus group by course and by sex are shown in table 5.2.

**Table 5.2: Focus Group Samples by Course and by Sex**

| Focus Groups     | Female<br>(no.) | Male<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|
| Combined Studies | 4               | 2             | 6              |
| BA Secondary     | 2               | 1             | 3              |
| B.Ed Secondary   | 2               | 1             | 3              |
| B.Ed Primary     | 7               | 0             | 7              |
| Total            | 15              | 4             | 19             |

The focus groups were significantly different in relation to the age groups of the students. The B.Ed Primary focus group consisted of students who had entered the university below the age of 21 years. The BA Secondary focus group consisted of two students who had entered the university below the age of twenty years old and one mature student. The B.Ed Secondary focus group and also the Combined Studies in Education focus group consisted of only mature students.

Each focus group was conducted in a seminar room at the university with the participants seated around a table. This allowed the respondents to face one another



with no individuals being placed away from the conversation. A microphone was placed in the middle of the table to record the interview and drinks were provided. This created an informal yet collective environment. The researcher explained the aims of the project and the focus group discussion and asked the relevant questions. The researcher attempted to have minimal intervention and allowed the participants to discuss the issues freely.

The value of focus group interviews as a qualitative research method is not so much what they are but what can be achieved by using them (Morgan, 1998). Krueger (1994) listed six advantages of using focus groups as a research method:

- Participants interact with others in a 'natural' social environment.
- The researcher can probe and explore unanticipated issues.
- Focus groups have 'high face validity' due to the belief that what the participants say is 'true'.
- Focus groups can cost little to conduct.
- Focus groups can provide quick results.
- Focus groups enable the researcher to increase the sample size compared to individual interviews with no increase in time or resources needed.

Wilson (1997) put forward other advantages of focus group interviews of which three were of particular relevance to this research. Focus groups can be used,

- "In conjunction with a quantitative project to deepen / broaden the researchers understanding.
- To help researchers understand previous data collected by qualitative methods.
- In conjunction with other qualitative methods e.g. In-depth interviews" (p.216).

Focus groups can be used, therefore, to gain information from a particular sample within a 'social' environment that allows the sample to discuss their viewpoints and their experiences. Focus groups have a three-part process of communication as shown below (Morgan, 1998):

- The researcher decides what information is needed from the participants.

- The participants create a conversation in which they exchange and share their opinions and experiences.
- The researcher summarises what information has been learned from the participants.

Before structuring the questions to be asked in the focus group interviews it was important to decide exactly what information you want to gain and whether the data shall be obtained from a free-flowing conversation or from a more structured and defined group interview.

Due to the specific nature and objectives of the research it was decided that the focus group interviews should follow a structured agenda (see Appendix 2). This ensured that all of the areas of interest to the research were discussed at some length. The questions were written in order to ensure that key issues are raised and discussed (see Appendix 3).

Questions specifically were asked with regard to: 'preparedness for higher education; information used to choose course and university; image of higher education pre-entry; experiences of course; information used/needed to manage studies; external factors that influence higher education experience, i.e. finance, accommodation, dependents, multi-site institution, social activities.

Each of the 19 participants in the focus groups were asked to complete a brief questionnaire in relation to their personal characteristics (see Appendix 4). Questions specifically asked were: age; sex; ethnic group; marital status; course; access route followed into higher education. The data collected from the brief questionnaire is shown through the seating plans of the focus group interviews (see Appendix 5). This enabled their responses and experiences to be correlated with their personal characteristics and backgrounds. This enabled the data to be combined with the same data obtained previously through the questionnaire survey and later by the individual interviews.



5.6 Qualitative Method: Individual Interviews

Interviews were conducted as the third and final stage of the research in order to develop further the qualitative data available in the study. Interviews were considered a useful research method to enable a more in-depth examination of how wider social factors can affect, to varying degrees, the life paths, particularly educational paths, of individual students identified as ‘representative of particular phenomena, such as different routes into higher education.

Nine individual interviews were conducted within final year students during May and June 1999, each representative of the nine access routes into higher education put forward by Thombs (1997). The interview sample consisted of eight females and one male. Though this provided a bias in relation to sex and possible gender role differences, the sample was obtained on a voluntary basis and, therefore, the researcher had little control over those students that volunteered their time. Table 5.3 below shows the interviews sample by course.

**Table 5.3: Interview Sample by Course**

| Course           | Total (no.) |
|------------------|-------------|
| Combined Studies | 3           |
| BA Secondary     | 2           |
| B.Ed Secondary   | 0           |
| B.Ed Primary     | 4           |
| Total            | 9           |

The questions used in the interviews (see Appendix 6) attempted to create an understanding of the life histories of the students, and also attempted to facilitate a life course analysis, defined by Farnes (1996) as, “the presentation and examination of life histories” (p.341). Life histories contain the full account of an individual’s life, being their educational, familial, economic, social, and career choices and paths. In order to understand the students’ life path’s it was important to recognise the importance and influential role each of these key factors have on individual choices.

“Life course analysis enables an examination of the place and influence of a course in students’ lives, the interaction between what is happening in their lives and the course itself, and the influence of the course on their subsequent activities. It emphasises the importance of the changing socio-economic context and how opportunities and constraints affect and have affected options and activities over time” (Farnes, 1996, p.341).

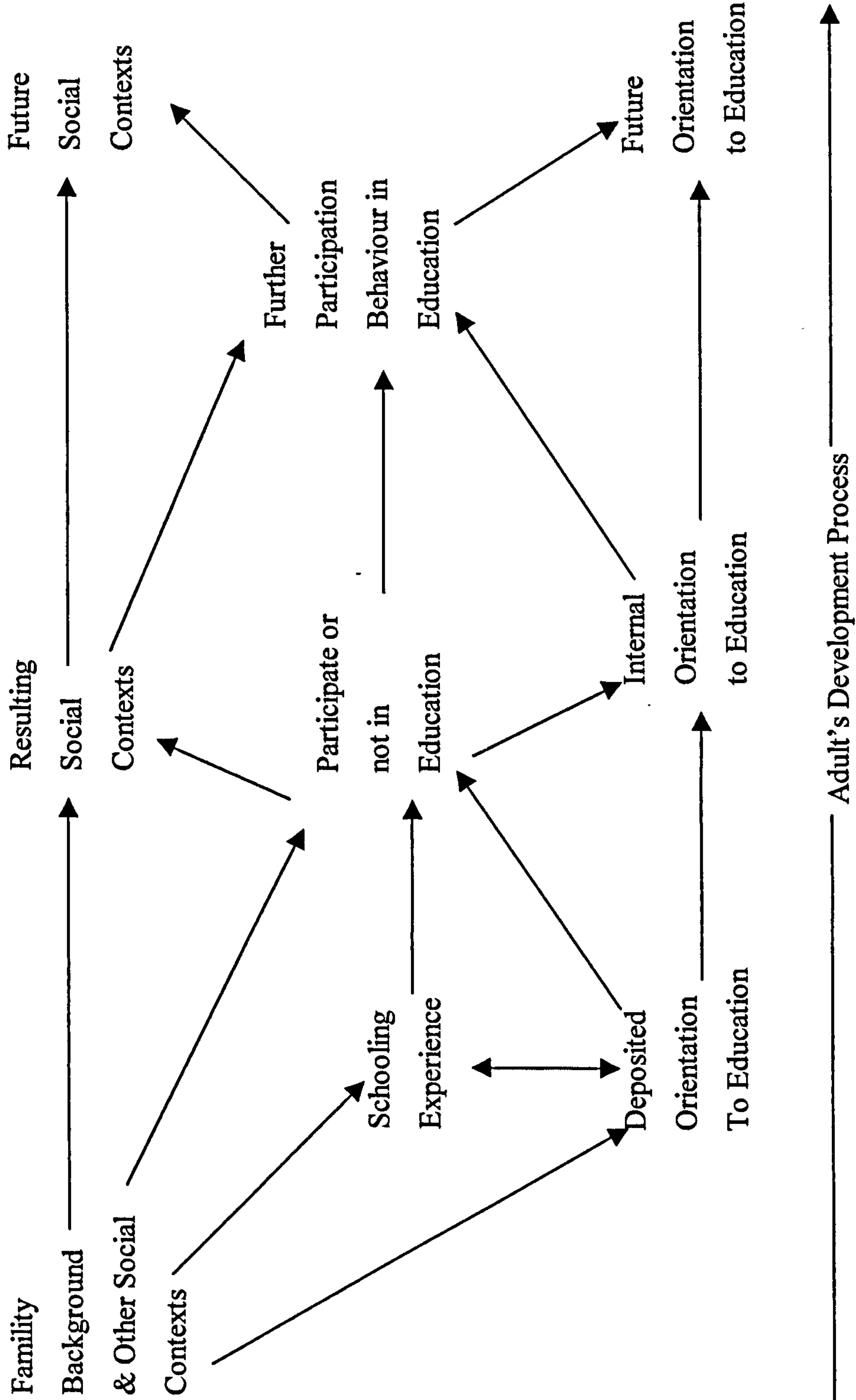
Yang (1998) put forward a longitudinal model of adult education participation that identified five main clusters of variables that may impact a life path. These five areas are socio-economic status; schooling experience; attitude towards education; self-evaluation; and participation in adult education. Yang’s model of adult education participation was regarded as appropriate for this research for it was designed to enable the research to understand,

“how adult education participation affects, and is affected by personal and social factors across the life span” (Yang, 1998, p.247).

Diagram 5.1 on the following page represents Yang’s (1998) model of adult education participation. The model represents the relationship between the individual adults and their social contexts, taking into account educational participation and a time framework of adult development.



**Diagram 5.1: Longitudinal Model of Adult Education Participation (Yang, 1998)**



*Source: Yang, 1998, p.250*

Though Yang's (1998) model was modified for use within this research, it devised and provided an outline and grounding for the life history interviews (see Appendix 6). The model provided a framework through which this research could consider the "dynamic relationship between individual adults and external contexts" (Yang, 1998, p.257). This enabled an examination of the differential experiences and choices of students who entered university through different access routes and 'paths', having made a variety of choices throughout their lives.

In support of this approach, Beck (1992) argues that an individual's biography is not pre-determined but is dependent on decisions taken and choices made. At the same time, individuals have to 'pay' for the decisions made and the decisions not taken. Though Beck (1992) recognised the influential role of social institutions on individual outcomes and opportunities, he argued that individuals are also the result of their decisions. Each individual therefore must deal with institutional conditions as the consequences of decisions already taken. Beck (1992), however, ignores the importance of socio-economic factors and the impact of factors such as social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; 1993) that are important to this research.

Within life histories it is important to recognise how the education system, society, and knowledge are produced and reproduced. Scott (1998) suggested that individuals' are able to understand and define their past lives through being able to conceptualise their present life. Individuals are influenced by, and are influential on social processes that make the notion of 'life' complex. Scott (1998) believed that individuals make sense of their lives by translating the past in ways that enables decisions to be made on present and future choices and paths. Farnes (1996) too has argued that,

"Life course analysis shows at what stage in students' various careers they participate; what else is going on in their lives at the time; and how education affects areas of their lives. This enables us to go further than the immediate learning gains and to examine how these are used for ongoing activities, to take up new activities and apply what has been learnt. Further analysis shows how changes in their socio-economic status interact with education" (p.352).

Erben (1998) suggests that biographical research can do what quantitative research cannot, which is to understand how and which factors have influenced the 'paths' of



individuals and placed them or geared them towards their current situation and outcome. Consequently, Blaxter et al (1996) suggests that interviews,

“can be a very useful technique for collecting data which would be unlikely to be accessible techniques such as observation or questionnaires” (p.153).

Erben (1998) argued that such biographical research has a general and a specific purpose.

“It’s general purpose is to provide greater insight...the specific purpose of the research will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some designated reason” (p.4).

Erben (1998) notes that the intention of biographical data is not to replicate an individual’s life but to ‘illuminate’ individual lives in relation to particular research objectives. The interviews, therefore, allowed the researcher to develop a life course analysis (Yang, 1998) of the students’ pathways into higher education. These are presented and discussed further in Chapter 11.

Before conducting an interview it was important to consider whether the data collected should be taped or be recorded through note taking. Blaxter et al (1996) argue that there are distinctive advantages and disadvantages to both of these methods. By recording an interview the researcher can concentrate on the interview itself and not be distracted by note taking. As a result of taping the interview, however, the interviewee may withhold information and feel unsure about the possibility of being ‘quoted’. In comparison, note taking provides a written record of the main points put forward by the interviewee and reduces the level of data analysis for the researcher to undertake, as no transcripts are needed. At the same time note taking can be distracting for the interviewer and the interviewee and break the flow of conversation, thus making the interviewee aware of the importance of what they are saying by the amount of note-taking occurring.

Though it is important to recognise the advantages and disadvantages of both of these processes of recording interview data, it was decided that, where possible, the interviews should be transcribed. This provided the research with full accounts of each interview. Though the interviews were transcribed, it was decided also that the main points should be noted briefly to ensure that data was collected. Due to the possibility of recording equipment failing, note taking would ensure that if

equipment did fail the main points of the interview were still noted. Blaxter et al (1996) recognise, however, that,

“Concentrating on asking questions, listening to the responses and taking notes is a complex process, and you will not get a complete verbatim record” (p.155).

Each interviewee was ensured complete confidentiality and the reason for both transcribing and note taking was explained before the interview began. Each interviewee understood the explanation and agreed to the interview being taped. Before the interview began each respondent was asked to complete a form that requested the appropriate boxes be ticked which represented their demographic data, such as age and sex (Appendix 4). It was made clear to each respondent that if there was any question they did not want to answer they should decline from providing an answer and the interviewer would proceed onto the next question. This did not occur in any of the interviews conducted.

### **5.6.1 Analysing Qualitative Data: Focus Groups and Individual Interviews**

Once the focus group interviews and subsequently the individual interviews were completed and transcribed, the data had to be analysed. Before beginning the analysis of the qualitative data, it was important to decide which process best suited the research and the research outcomes. Qualitative data analysis attempts to order, structure and interpret a mass of collected data. Marshall & Rossman (1999) note that,

“In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis typically go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation of the data. The researcher is guided by initial concepts and developing understandings but shifts or modifies them as she collects and analysed the data” (p.151).

It was decided that the data obtained from the qualitative research would be analysed by comparing the answers given for each question by each of the nine interviewees. In this process,

“The researcher should use the preliminary research questions and the related literature developed earlier for data analysis. The earlier grounding and planning can be used to suggest several categories that can serve to code the data initially for subsequent analysis” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.152).

The literature search and the study previously conducted by Thombs (1997) were used as a basis on which to develop the structure and main areas of interest to the



research. Both qualitative methods adopted in this study, therefore, were structured around the main themes of the research to ensure consistency throughout the data analysis. The main themes and topics from both the focus group interviews and the individual interviews, therefore, provided a framework within which to interpret and evaluate the data obtained. The study aimed to obtain information that would enable a life history of the students' pathways into higher education to be developed (see chapter 11). This allowed the researcher to examine the data in depth and use the verbal information provided instead of relying on computer packages and the categorisation of qualitative data. Coffey & Atkinson (1996) argued that all researchers should "be able to organise, manage, and retrieve the most meaningful bits of our data" (p.26).

### **5.7 Validity and Reliability of Quantitative and Qualitative Research**

Within case study research, validity and reliability are considered by some writers to not be 'vital' concepts. Bassey (1999) argues, for instance, that,

"A case study is the study of a singularity which is chosen because of its interest to the researcher (or the researcher's sponsor) and, it is hoped, the reader of the case report. It is not chosen as a 'typical' example in the sense that typicality is empirically demonstrated, and so issues of external validity are not meaningful" (p.75).

However, though external reliability and validity may not be viable to this particular piece of research, it is important to consider and ensure however possible its internal validity and reliability, particularly in relation to the research process, the theoretical evaluations and understandings, and its representation of the students' involved in the study.

To understand and ensure the importance of validity and reliability in social and educational research it is necessary to have clear definitions of both these terms. Blaxter et al (1996) put forward a definition of validity thus:

"Validity has to do with whether your methods, approaches and techniques actually relate to, or measure, the issues you have been exploring" (p.200).

Vaus de (1996) defines validity as,

"a valid measure is one which measures what it is intended to measure. In fact, it is not the measure that is valid or invalid but the use to which the measure is put" (p.55).

To measure validity, therefore, it was necessary to ensure that the concepts being utilised in the research were accurately and clearly defined. It was necessary to define precisely what was being measured to ensure, as far as possible, validity.

Birley & Moreland (1998) put forward three ways of achieving validity:

- Carry out a pilot study to check that the data produced is relevant.
- The research instrument can be checked by ‘experts’ to assess the likelihood of it measuring its’ aims.
- The research tool correlates with existing research tools within similar research projects.

The three methods put forward by Birley & Moreland (1998) to ensure validity were carried out throughout the quantitative data collection process. A pilot study was initiated and carried out ensuring that the questions were relevant and clear to understand. The questionnaire was written and designed by the researcher, though constant recommendations for improvement were put forward and considered by three university research staff. The research methods adopted for this study (i.e. questionnaire survey, focus groups, individual interviews) reflected those used by other studies, particularly Thombs (1997), due to the research focus being ‘specification’ rather than ‘generalisation’, allowing the examination of a small sample in depth. As Morgan & Krueger (1993) state,

“When the goal is specification rather than generalisations, focus groups and other qualitative methods are the appropriate tools” (p.9).

This triangulation of validity method is considered appropriate and valid method for data collection in the case study.

In turn, Black (1996) defines reliability as follows:

“In simple terms, high reliability means that if you measure something today with your instrument, you should get very much the same results some other time (10 minutes from now, tomorrow, next week), assuming that what or who you are measuring has not changed”(p.72).

Oppenheim (1998) too states that,

“Reliability refers to the purity and consistency of a measure, to repeatability, to the probability of obtaining the same results again if the measure were to be duplicated” (p.144).



Questionnaires have advantages as a research tool in relation to ensuring as far as possible a high degree of reliability. Cohen & Manion (1995) argued that one of the advantages of self-response questionnaires is that they tend to be more reliable and “because it is anonymous, it encourages greater honesty” (p.283). The questionnaire survey was anonymous which the researcher verbally made clear to the student sample. A number of students reaffirmed this point by talking to the researcher before completing the questionnaire. Once anonymity was ensured, the respondents completed the questionnaires fully.

Within qualitative research, Cohen & Manion (1995) have argued that to achieve validity the researcher must minimise the amount of possible bias. Cohen & Manion (1995) list the four main forms of bias in research as: the characteristics of the interviewer; the characteristics of the respondent; the substantive content of the questions; race, religion, social class and age.

“More particularly, these will include: the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer; a tendency for the interviewer to see the respondent in her own image; a tendency for the interviewer to seek answers that support her preconceived notions; misperceptions on the part of the interviewer of what the respondent is saying; and misunderstandings on the part of the respondent of what is being asked” (Cohen & Manion, 1995, p.282).

The aim of this study, therefore, was to minimise any possible bias, though accepting that complete elimination of bias may be an impossible task. The researcher attempted, throughout the research process, to maintain a degree of separateness to the samples, attempting to obtain information in a non-leading way and not contributing to ideas or suggestions put forward by the samples. It was recognised throughout the focus group and interview processes that the students related to the researcher as another ‘student’ and not as a university member of staff. It was felt, therefore, that the atmosphere within the group and individual interviews was informal and that the students considered that their responses could be open and yet remain confidential. Gender was also recognised as a possible factor that may have influenced the research and produce bias, but whether this can be regarded as positive or negative is disputable. The researcher is female, the same sex as the majority of the students within the samples (n=16 of 19), and this seemed to reduce any barriers produced by differences between sex and instead create an informal and recognisable environment.

The reliability and validity of the data collected has implications on the extent to that the results can be generalised. It was important to consider how far the data obtained represents the wider population in question needs. Schofield (1996) argued that many qualitative researchers reject generalisability and instead promote a process of 'interpretative inquiry' where every piece of research has it's own structure and meaning. For Krueger (1994),

"Whereas the descriptive process results in a summary, the interpretative process aims at providing understanding... Interpretation takes into account evidence beyond words on a transcript and includes evidence from the field notes coupled with other background information" (p.132).

Schofield (1996) suggests, however, that qualitative researchers recently have started to recognise the importance of generalisation and argues,

"I believe that it is useful for qualitative researchers interested in the study of educational processes and institutions to try to generalise to three domains: to *what is*, to *what may be*, and to *what could be*" (p.208).

Schofield (1996) described studying 'what is' as research into an ongoing social situation; studying 'what may be' is the consideration of 'current social and educational trends' and what these may imply about future issues within that field; and studying 'what could be' as examining what may be seen as 'ideal' situations and assessing how these work. Blaxter et al (1996) suggest that,

"Unless your interpretation is to be a one-off and wholly personal exercise, you will have to engage in a more general consideration of the relevance and usefulness of your work" (p.199).

By considering the findings of this research alongside current changes in higher educational provision and the implications these changes may have on the future of educational experiences and opportunities, compared to other studies of educational environments, particularly those perceived as 'ideal' in some way, it may be possible to provide some form of generalisation.

## 5.8 Ethical Considerations of the Research

Cohen & Manion (1994) argued that social researchers must take responsibility for their profession and the subjects they depend on for information, for,

"Whatever the specific nature of their work, social researchers must take into account the effects of the research on participants, and act in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings. Such is ethical behaviour" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.359).



Ethics must be taken into consideration within the context of the research and the methods adopted. Most research, for example, does not threaten individual privacy or cause embarrassment to the participants. However, when research topics are sensitive, ethical issues must be considered and taken account of effectively.

Bassey (1999) argued that there are three main ethical considerations that should be taken into account whilst conducting a case study. The respect for democracy is the first consideration that involves the freedom to conduct research freely without endangering ourselves or the sample or those within their environment. Secondly, researchers should be “expected to be truthful in data collection, analysis and the reporting of findings”. (p.74) Finally, researchers should respect the privacy of those who participate in the study, and respect the samples’ ownership of the data and information they are providing. These three considerations were accounted for throughout the research process.

Focus groups raise more ethical considerations than an anonymous questionnaire survey. The participants are not only sharing information with the researcher but also with other participants, and this may make participants feel uneasy about disclosing certain information, particularly with strangers. Privacy and openness is thus a central concern with focus groups. Participants must feel that whatever information is provided will not be accredited to them specifically. Instead,

“Procedures for maintaining confidentiality must ensure that participants can safely share their experiences and opinions without having their statements used against them” (Morgan, 1998, p.88).

Morgan (1998) suggests that confidentiality is guaranteed by ensuring the following:

- Only the researcher has access to recruitment information.
- Participants should be identified by first names or pseudonyms only.
- Only the researcher has access to transcript tapes.
- Names and identifying information of participants will be removed from transcripts.
- Researcher should ask the group if they have any requirements to ensure that privacy is maintained.

Researchers need to consider what is the appropriate level of disclosure and how much information participants will want to provide. Researchers also need to set boundaries to protect the participants privacy. This requires advanced planning to ensure that the appropriate questions are used and to not cause any embarrassment to any of those involved.

“Sponsors have an ethical responsibility to protect the rights of participants but also have rights of their own that need to be protected. Similarly, the participants have both rights and responsibilities. They have a right to understand any risks involved in the project, they have a right to confidentiality, and they should experience a minimum of stress” (Morgan, 1998, p.96).

Participants must be aware that what information is provided and recorded cannot be taken back and that it is not only their privacy but also the privacy of the other participants that must be considered. Asking the group if they want to make their own ground rules before they begin discussing opinions should provide an insight into how the participants regard their own privacy and whether they are concerned.

## **5.9 Discussion of Findings**

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research stages of this case study are presented next in chapters 6-10. Each of these chapters shall focus on one of the main areas of inquiry and discuss the findings in both a descriptive format and in relation to the theoretical framework.

Throughout the discussion of the data, much of the quantitative data is supported by the findings from the focus groups and, where appropriate, the individual interviews. The questionnaire survey identified particular preferences and experiences that were not necessarily obtained through the qualitative methodologies. In such instances, the data shall be discussed in relation to the ‘questionnaire survey sample’ only. However, in instances where areas of interest to the research were examined within all three samples of the study, the data shall be discussed in relation to ‘all sample’.

The data and information gathered from the three research methodologies adopted for this study enabled the researcher to obtain information in both a statistical and numerical format alongside a narrative format. Numerical data obtained through the questionnaire survey (quantitative) is presented in the format of tables, charts, and figures, whereas the qualitative data (focus groups and individual interviews) is



presented in the format of quotes. Quotes have been used from both qualitative samples for discussion. Where quotes are used, it is made clear which student from which sample presented the quote. Attached in brackets to each quote, therefore, is a brief summary of the student's characteristics, course, and to which sample they belonged.

Following on, chapter 11 presents a discussion of Yang's (1998) model of life course analysis, applying it to the data obtained through the individual interviews. The aim of the individual interviews was to examine the students' educational and life pathways alongside their experiences of, and 'pathways' into, higher education. The data presented in Chapter 11, therefore, is solely from the nine individual interviews devised and undertaken with the intention of creating an understanding of students educational and life pathways, with each of the students being representative of one of the nine access routes identified by Thombs (1997) educational pathways.

Chapter 6: Samples Characteristics and Backgrounds

This chapter represents the characteristics of the questionnaire survey (quantitative), the focus group interviews (qualitative) and the access route interviews (qualitative) samples. The samples consisted of students studying Education courses at one particular university. It is important, therefore, to provide a breakdown of the student samples by course. Table 6.1 below presents the students by sample and by course.

**Table 6.1: Students by Sample and Course**

| Course           | Questionnaire Survey<br>(no.) | Focus Groups<br>(no.) | Interviews<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| B.Ed Primary     | 68                            | 7                     | 4                   | 79             |
| B.Ed Secondary   | 8                             | 3                     | 0                   | 11             |
| BA Secondary     | 34                            | 3                     | 2                   | 39             |
| Combined Studies | 76                            | 6                     | 3                   | 85             |
| No answer        | 8                             | 0                     | 0                   | 8              |
| Total            | 194                           | 19                    | 9                   | 222            |

The samples consisted mostly of students studying either B.Ed Primary (n=79) or Combined Studies in Education (n=85) courses. Those students remaining (n=50) were studying either B.Ed Secondary (n=11) or BA Secondary (n=39) courses. 8 students did not specify their course of study.

6.1 Breakdown of Students’ Characteristics

The samples were students on Education courses who were asked to provide data in relation to: social class; age; access route; gender; and ethnic group. Before discussing the students’ characteristics and backgrounds in more depth, the following tables shall provide a brief breakdown of the students’ characteristics by course.

6.1.1 Social Class

The questionnaire sample was asked to specify their social class by providing their own definitions (e.g. working class or upper middle class etc). The qualitative samples, however, were not asked to specify their social class, but instead discussed their educational paths and experiences in relation to their backgrounds. The numerical data for social class, therefore, is only representative of the questionnaire sample. Table 6.2 represents the findings.



**Table 6.2: Social Class by Course: Questionnaire Sample**

| <b>Social Class</b> | <b>B.Ed<br/>Primary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>B.Ed<br/>Secondary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>BA<br/>Secondary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Combined<br/>Studies<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>No<br/>answer<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Total<br/>(no.)</b> |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Working</b>      | 6                                 | 0                                   | 4                                 | 9                                     | 1                              | 20                     |
| <b>Lower middle</b> | 1                                 | 0                                   | 0                                 | 2                                     | 0                              | 3                      |
| <b>Middle</b>       | 8                                 | 0                                   | 2                                 | 6                                     | 0                              | 16                     |
| <b>Upper middle</b> | 1                                 | 0                                   | 0                                 | 0                                     | 1                              | 2                      |
| <b>No answer</b>    | 52                                | 8                                   | 28                                | 59                                    | 6                              | 153                    |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>68</b>                         | <b>8</b>                            | <b>34</b>                         | <b>76</b>                             | <b>8</b>                       | <b>194</b>             |

Of the questionnaire sample (n=194), 1% (n=2) students defined their social class as upper-middle class, 8.3% (n=16) as middle class, 1.5% (n=3) as lower-middle class and 10.3% (n=20) as working class. 78.9% (n=153) students gave no answer. A total of 21.1% (n=41) of the students considered themselves to belong to a particular social class. Despite a high number of non-respondents, the distribution appears to be biased towards middle class, a continuing known characteristic of higher education. The students who ‘refused’ to answer may be indicating a perceived position of ‘classlessness’, not being wholly economically active at the time.

**6.1.2 Age**

All three samples (questionnaire survey, focus groups, interviews) were asked to state their age on entrance to the university. The ages of the students at the time of the research was not important as the aim was to determine at what age the students entered higher education. The ages of the students are shown in table 6.3.

**Table 6.3: Age Groups by Course: All Sample**

| <b>Age<br/>Group<br/>(years)</b> | <b>B.Ed<br/>Primary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>B.Ed<br/>Secondary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>BA<br/>Secondary<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Combined<br/>Studies<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>No<br/>answer<br/>(no.)</b> | <b>Total<br/>(no.)</b> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>&lt;20</b>                    | 54                                | 0                                   | 14                                | 38                                    | 1                              | 107                    |
| <b>21-24</b>                     | 10                                | 1                                   | 5                                 | 14                                    | 3                              | 33                     |
| <b>25-29</b>                     | 7                                 | 4                                   | 7                                 | 7                                     | 0                              | 25                     |
| <b>30-34</b>                     | 1                                 | 1                                   | 6                                 | 9                                     | 0                              | 17                     |
| <b>35-39</b>                     | 7                                 | 1                                   | 3                                 | 9                                     | 0                              | 20                     |
| <b>40-44</b>                     | 1                                 | 0                                   | 2                                 | 3                                     | 1                              | 7                      |
| <b>45-49</b>                     | 1                                 | 1                                   | 0                                 | 1                                     | 0                              | 3                      |
| <b>50&lt;</b>                    | 0                                 | 0                                   | 2                                 | 2                                     | 0                              | 4                      |
| <b>No answer</b>                 | 1                                 | 0                                   | 0                                 | 2                                     | 3                              | 6                      |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>82</b>                         | <b>8</b>                            | <b>39</b>                         | <b>85</b>                             | <b>8</b>                       | <b>222</b>             |

The majority (n=109) of the students entered the university as mature students (aged 21 years old or above), with 107 students having entered aged 20 years or below. Though there are slightly more students who entered the university as mature students than one might expect, the sample was almost divided exactly between mature students (n=109) and those that entered aged 20 years or below (n=107). These findings have implications for the concept of the ‘traditional student’.

The term ‘traditional’ student has previously applied to those students aged 20 years or below who entered higher education direct from school with A levels. Due to the increase in mature students within higher education, the different life experiences of students of all age groups, and the number of students entering higher education through a variety of access routes, it was considered appropriate to use quotation marks to refer to the term ‘traditional student’ though in this research to refer to those students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university.

6.1.3 Access Route

All three of the research method samples were asked to state the access route they followed into higher education from a list provided (Thombs, 1997). The access routes represented the educational and non-educational experiences of the students, and the duration of time before they entered higher education. The access routes followed by the students in relation to which course they were studying is shown in table 6.4.

**Table 6.4: Access Route by Course: All Sample**

| Access Routes | B.Ed Primary (no.) | B.Ed Secondary (no.) | BA Secondary (no.) | Combined Studies (no.) | No answer (no.) | Total (no.) |
|---------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| A             | 25                 | 0                    | 6                  | 13                     | 1               | 45          |
| B             | 18                 | 0                    | 3                  | 8                      | 0               | 29          |
| C             | 7                  | 0                    | 3                  | 6                      | 0               | 16          |
| D             | 14                 | 1                    | 7                  | 21                     | 4               | 47          |
| E             | 3                  | 6                    | 8                  | 14                     | 1               | 32          |
| F             | 0                  | 0                    | 3                  | 3                      | 2               | 8           |
| G             | 0                  | 3                    | 1                  | 4                      | 0               | 8           |
| H             | 0                  | 0                    | 0                  | 3                      | 0               | 3           |
| I             | 3                  | 0                    | 1                  | 4                      | 0               | 8           |
| No answer     | 9                  | 1                    | 7                  | 9                      | 0               | 26          |
| Total         | 79                 | 11                   | 39                 | 85                     | 8               | 194         |



The access route followed mostly by the students was Route D (Access course) with 21.2% (n=47) of the students entering higher education via this route. Route A (from school) was used by 20.3% (n=45) of the students numerically followed by Route E (mature, other qualifications) which was used by 14.1% (n=32) of the students. 13.1% (n=29) of the student sample followed Route B (FE, then university), and 7.2% (n=16) students followed Route C (sixth-form then FE) with 1.4% (n=3) students that followed Route H (mature, previously gained qualifications). 3.6% (n=8) students followed Route I (Route A plus non-educational activities) with Route G (mature, left another course/university) and Route F (vocational qualifications) also both followed by 3.6% (n=8) of students each. 11.7% (n=26) of the student sample did not specify which route they followed into higher education (chart 6.4). The distribution obviously is a statement to the commitment of this particular University to widening access.

6.1.4 Gender

Table 6.5 shows the numbers of men and women from each of the three samples and which courses they were studying.

**Table 6.5: Sex of Students by Course: All Sample**

| Course              | Male<br>(no.) | Female<br>(no.) | No Answer<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|---------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|
| B.Ed. Secondary     | 8             | 3               | 0                  | 11             |
| B.Ed. Primary       | 11            | 68              | 0                  | 79             |
| BA (Hons) Secondary | 17            | 21              | 1                  | 39             |
| Combined Studies    | 13            | 71              | 1                  | 85             |
| No answer           | 2             | 6               | 0                  | 8              |
| Total               | 51            | 169             | 2                  | 222            |

The data reveals that significantly more women (n=169) than men (n=51) in this sample chose to study Education courses in this particular university. Though the female students were similar in number for the courses B.Ed Primary (n=68) and Combined Studies in Education (n=71), there were significantly less females studying courses into Secondary education (n=24). For the male students, however, there were more qualifying to teach within Secondary education (n=25), compared to either B.Ed Primary (n=11) or Combined Studies in Education (n=13). This again reflects the course aims and design of the Secondary B.Ed which being shortened and based on entry with advanced standing, specifically attracts mature students.

### 6.1.5 Ethnic Group

All students from all three samples were asked to define their ethnic group. The information is provided in table 6.6.

In relation to ethnicity and course being studied, it was found that of those students studying the B.Ed Secondary course there were 90.9% (n=10) that were White European students and 9.1% (n=1) classified as Black Caribbean. Of those students studying BA Secondary, 21.6% (n=8) were from minority ethnic backgrounds compared to 78.4% (n=29) of White (European) students. 10.6% (n=8) minority ethnic students studied B.Ed Primary compared to 89.3% (n=67) of White (European) students. The course with the most minority ethnic students was Combined Studies (18.3% - n=15) compared to 80.5% (n=66) of White (European) students. 3.8% (n=8) of the sample did not specify either their ethnic group of their course.

**Table 6.6: Ethnic Groups of Students by Course: All Sample**

| <b>Ethnic Group</b>     | <b>B.Ed Primary (no.)</b> | <b>B.Ed Secondary (no.)</b> | <b>BA Secondary (no.)</b> | <b>Combined Studies (no.)</b> | <b>No answer (no.)</b> | <b>Total (no.)</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>White (European)</b> | 71                        | 10                          | 29                        | 69                            | 5                      | 184                |
| <b>White (other)</b>    | 1                         | 0                           | 1                         | 4                             | 1                      | 7                  |
| <b>Black African</b>    | 0                         | 0                           | 1                         | 1                             | 0                      | 2                  |
| <b>Black Caribbean</b>  | 0                         | 1                           | 2                         | 5                             | 1                      | 9                  |
| <b>Pakistani</b>        | 1                         | 0                           | 2                         | 2                             | 1                      | 6                  |
| <b>Indian</b>           | 3                         | 0                           | 2                         | 0                             | 0                      | 5                  |
| <b>Chinese</b>          | 0                         | 0                           | 0                         | 1                             | 0                      | 1                  |
| <b>Asian (other)</b>    | 2                         | 0                           | 0                         | 2                             | 0                      | 4                  |
| <b>Other</b>            | 0                         | 0                           | 2                         | 0                             | 0                      | 2                  |
| <b>No answer</b>        | 1                         | 0                           | 0                         | 1                             | 0                      | 2                  |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>79</b>                 | <b>11</b>                   | <b>39</b>                 | <b>85</b>                     | <b>8</b>               | <b>222</b>         |

Students from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to study on a Teacher Training course (n=17) than on Combined Studies (n=15). This appears to contradict the literature, which argues that very few students from minority ethnic backgrounds apply for, and study on, courses which lead to a teaching qualification (Taylor, 1992; Skellington & Morris, 1992).

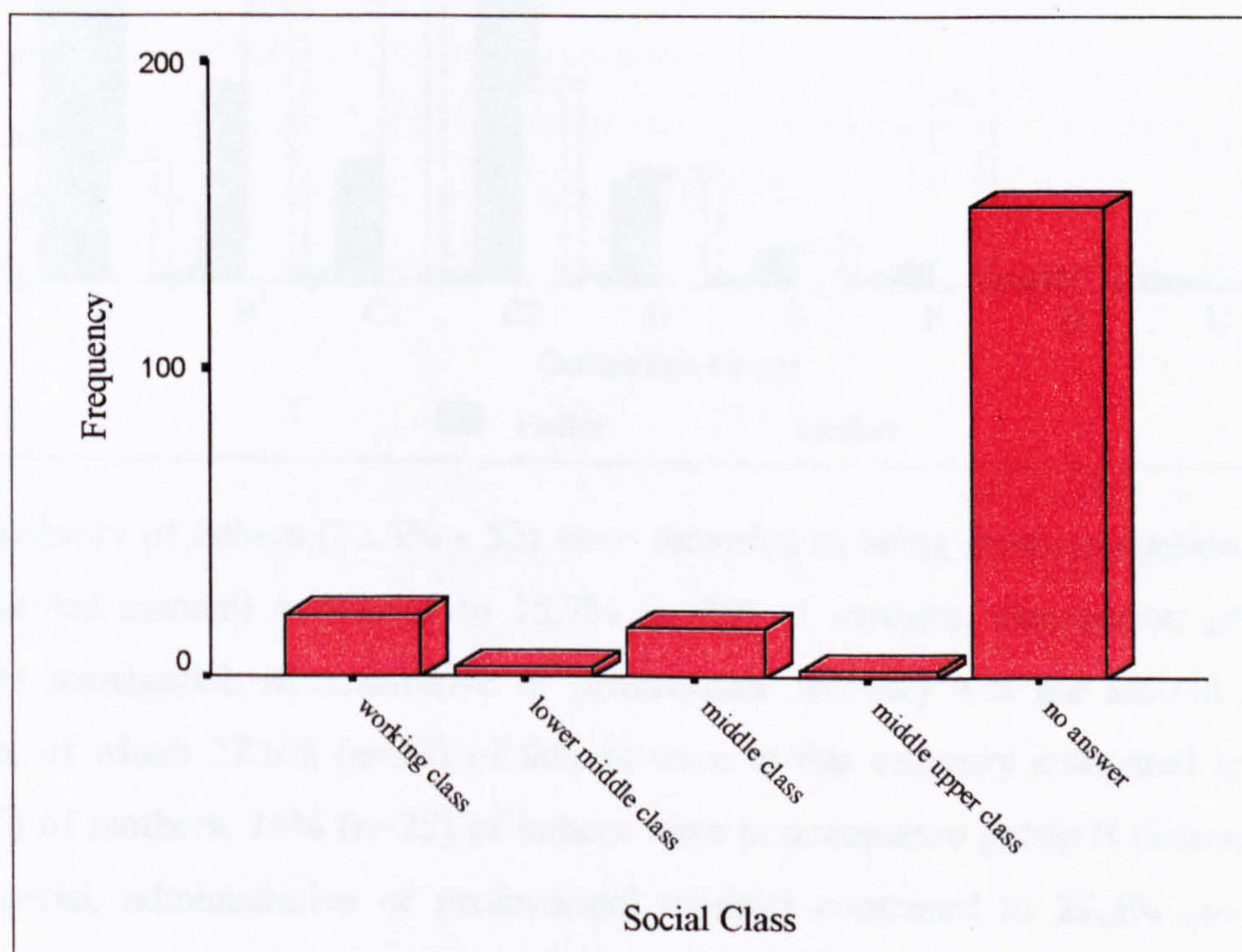


## 6.2 Social Class

The questionnaire sample was asked for their own definitions of which, if any, social class they considered themselves to be long to (chart 6.1). The focus groups and access route interviews did not ask the students to specify which social class they considered themselves to belong to, but instead examined the possible impact of factors related to social class such as educational background and life chances.

Of those students who did specify their social class ( $n=41$ ), a total of 51.2% ( $n=21$ ) considered themselves to be from 'middle-class' backgrounds, with 48.8% ( $n=20$ ) coming from 'working class' backgrounds. These findings echo the debate that children from middle class families are more likely than children from working class families to continue their education into higher education (Reid, 1998). The low number of students (41 of 194) who defined themselves as a particular social class seems to imply that social class was not important to the students at that particular juncture. However, it cannot be assumed that the low response rate of the students signifies that they do not consider themselves to belong to a particular social class. This invites further study into why students may not associate themselves with a particular social class, particularly whilst studying in higher education.

**Chart 6.1: Social Class of Students: Questionnaire Sample**



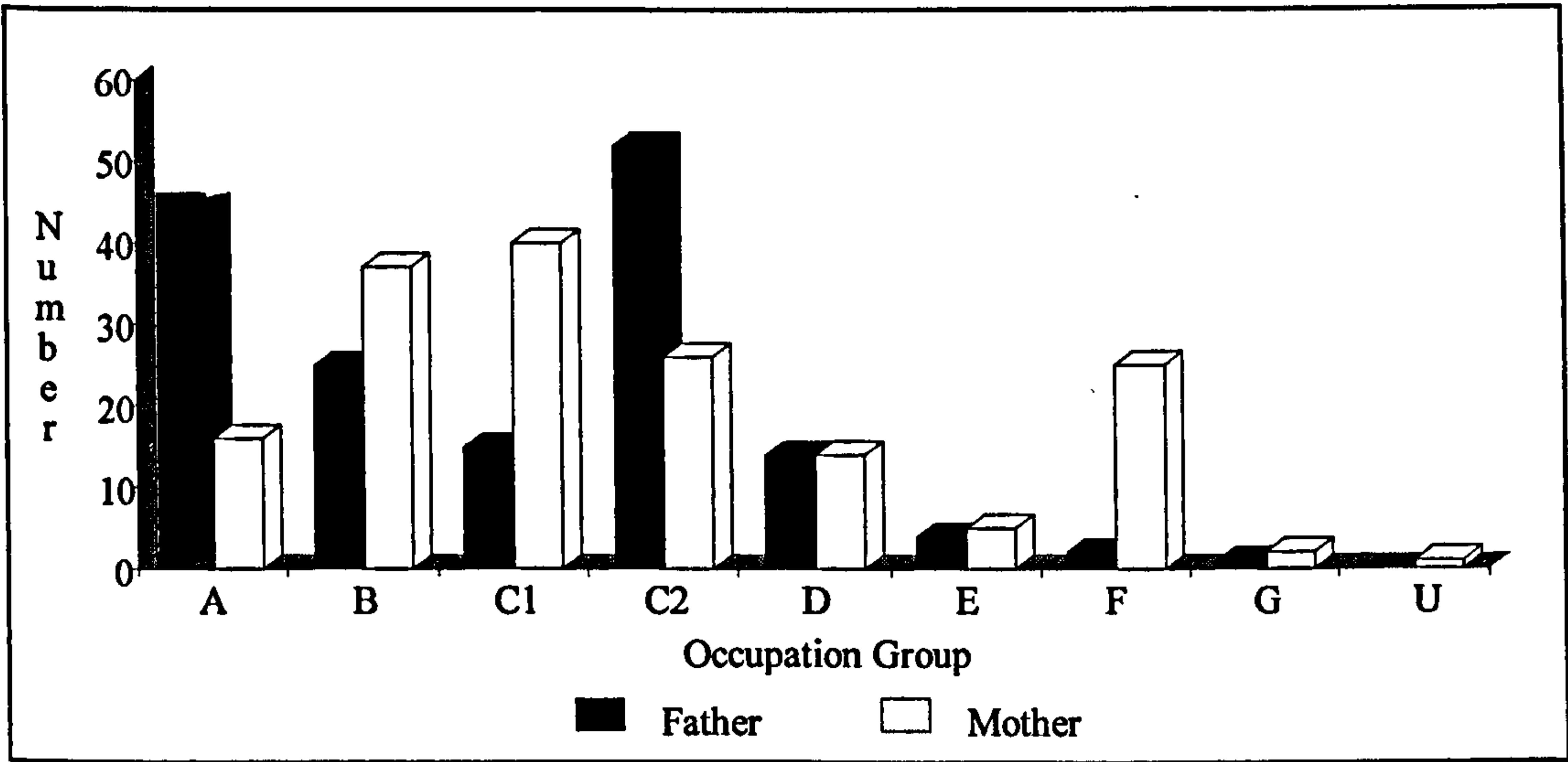


The questionnaire sample was also asked how they defined and understood which social class they belong to. 21.1% (n=41) defined their social class by the social class of their parents. 2.1% (n=4) of the students defined their social class by their own previous occupation, and 17.5% (n=34) stated that they belonged to no particular social class whilst they are a student in higher education. Being in higher education, for many, however, may signify a perceived state of 'classlessness', especially if class is associated with occupation. This may explain why some of the (n=153 of 194) questionnaire sample did not consider themselves as belonging to a particular social class.

6.2.1 Parents Occupations

The questionnaire sample was asked to specify the occupations of both parents (chart 6.2). Occupational classifications were provided for 156 fathers and 166 mothers.

**Chart 6.2: Occupations of Parents of Students: Questionnaire Sample**



The majority of fathers (33.3% - 52) were recorded as being from occupation group C2 (skilled manual) compared to 15.7% (n=26) of mothers. Occupation group A (higher managerial, administrative or professional worker) was the second largest group, of which 27.6% (n=43) of fathers were in this category compared to 9.6% (n=16) of mothers. 16% (n=25) of fathers were in occupation group B (intermediate managerial, administrative or professional worker) compared to 22.3% (n=37) of mothers. This was followed by 9.6% (n=15) of fathers in occupation group C1



(supervisory or clerical and junior or managerial, administrative worker) compared to 24.1% (n=40) of mothers. 8.9% (n=14) of fathers were in occupation category D (semi-skilled and unskilled workers) compared to 8.4% (n=14) of mothers.

Only 2.6% (n=4) of fathers were in occupation group E (state pensioner or unskilled manual worker) compared to 3% (n=5) of mothers. Only 1.3% (n=2) of fathers were classified as house-person compared to 15.1% (n=25) of mothers. 1.2% (n=2) of mothers were categorised as students though no fathers were in this category.

The majority of fathers (135 of 156) and mothers (119 of 166) occupations given were in categories A to C2 with very few parents in occupation categories D to F (additional category F added by researcher to obtain further information). This raises interest in the extent to which students enter higher education as a means of short-range social mobility or social confirmation. Also, this finding highlights how most students had parents that were in occupational groups A to C2, thereby possessing to varying degrees, human capital. The occupational status and achievements of the parents could be an influential factor on the occupational aspirations and perceived opportunities of the students, reinforcing the debate of social confirmation rather than social mobility. Those parents in occupational groups D to F, therefore, are likely to have had less human capital in terms of educational achievement and occupational qualifications, thereby supporting the debate that their children used education as a means of social mobility, entering an occupation that will provide more 'capital' than that of their parents. Human capital shall be explored further and in more depth more appropriately in the following chapters.

### **6.2.2 Previous Education**

The findings appear to exemplify how educational backgrounds and the type of educational institution attended are not clear indicators of social class identification, though the picture is a complex one. The data is shown on table 6.7.

**Table 6.7: Social Class by Educational Institution Attended:**  
**Questionnaire Sample**

| Type of Educational Institution Attended | Working Class (no.) | Lower Middle Class (no.) | Middle Class (no.) | Upper Middle Class (no.) | No answer (no.) | Total (no.) |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Comprehensive                            | 13                  | 2                        | 8                  | 1                        | 98              | 122         |
| Grant Maintained                         | 2                   | 1                        | 3                  | 0                        | 44              | 50          |
| State                                    | 3                   | 1                        | 4                  | 1                        | 38              | 47          |
| Grammar                                  | 1                   | 2                        | 5                  | 0                        | 24              | 32          |
| Private                                  | 2                   | 0                        | 0                  | 0                        | 0               | 2           |
| City Technology College                  | 2                   | 1                        | 5                  | 0                        | 57              | 65          |
| Sixth form at school                     | 6                   | 2                        | 6                  | 1                        | 57              | 72          |
| Sixth form at college                    | 7                   | 1                        | 6                  | 0                        | 69              | 83          |
| FE College                               | 12                  | 1                        | 8                  | 1                        | 93              | 115         |
| Open University                          | 13                  | 2                        | 10                 | 2                        | 106             | 133         |
| HE institution                           | 1                   | 2                        | 2                  | 0                        | 20              | 25          |
| University                               | 9                   | 2                        | 11                 | 1                        | 99              | 122         |
| Total                                    | 71                  | 17                       | 68                 | 7                        | 705             | 823         |

It is evident from the data presented in table 6.7 that students chose more than one of the listed options to describe their previous educational institutions attended. The number of students who specified their social class (n=41) does not reflect the data shown in table 6.7. For example, the number of students in table 6.7 specifying their social class should not exceed 41. However, on examining the data the numbers do not coincide. The data above, therefore, may be used to reflect the findings but not represent the actual school and post-school experiences of the students.

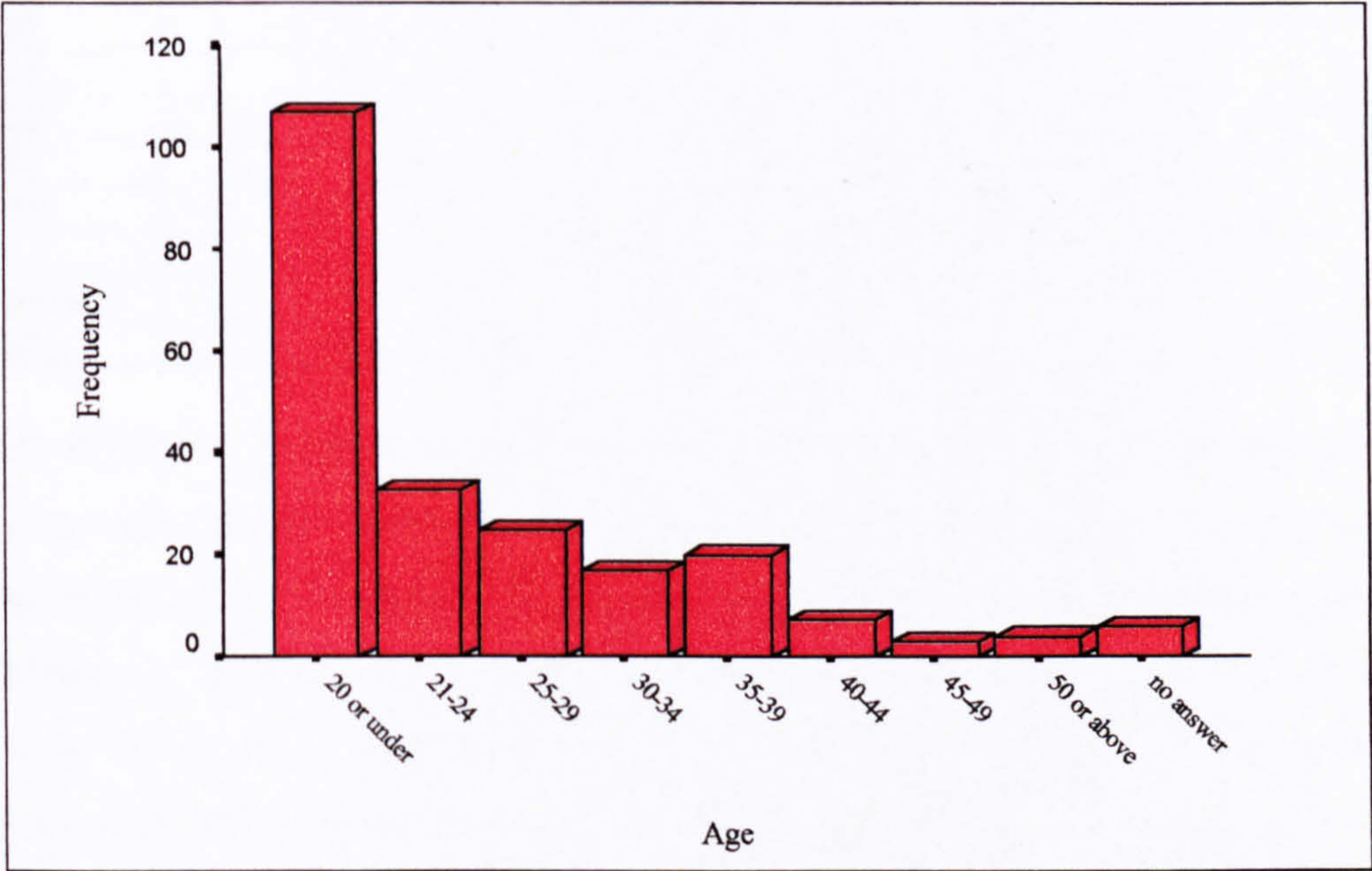
There were 21 students (21 out of 194) who defined their social class as either lower-middle, middle, or upper-middle, and the majority of these students attended state comprehensive schools. Both of the students who attended private school defined their social class as working class. These results invite further investigation of which social factors alongside social class may influence students' educational routes and choices. The findings imply that other influential social factors such 'cultural capital', (Bourdieu, 1993) and 'relational-social capital' (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) must be investigated and recognised. This types of capital shall be explored further in the following chapters.



6.3 Age

The questionnaire, focus group, and access route interview samples were asked to define their age at the commencement of their courses (chart 6.3).

**Chart 6.3: Age Groups of Students: All Sample**



Of the quantitative and qualitative samples (n=222), 48.2% (n=107) students were 20 years or below when they began their course. 14.9% (n=33) were 21-24 years old and 11.3% (n=25) were 25-29 years old at the beginning of their course. 7.7% (n=17) were aged 30-34 years old, 9% (n=20) were aged 35-39 years old, 3.2% (n=7) were 40-44 years old, 1.4% (n=3) were 45-49 years old, and 1.8% (n=4) were 50 years or older. 2.7% (n=6) students withheld their age at the commencement of their course. A slight majority of the students (n=109) entered higher education aged 21 years or above, compared to 107 students who entered the university aged 20 years old or below.

6.3.1 Age Decided To Enter Higher Education

The questionnaire sample was asked to define the age at which they decided to enter higher education. The data obtained is shown in table 6.8.



**Table 6.8: Age Students Decided to Enter Higher Education  
by Age Students Entered Higher Education: Questionnaire Sample**

| Age<br>(years) | Ages Students Decided to Enter Higher Education<br>(years) |      |       |       |       |     | No answer<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|----------------|--|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|--------------------|----------------|
|                | <5   | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21-25 | 26< |                    |                |
| <20            | 1  | 13   | 43    | 35    | 0     | 0   | 0                  | 92             |
| 21-24          | 0  | 2    | 7     | 4     | 17    | 0   | 0                  | 30             |
| 25-29          | 0  | 1    | 1     | 8     | 7     | 6   | 0                  | 23             |
| 30-34          | 0  | 0    | 1     | 1     | 3     | 9   | 0                  | 14             |
| 35-39          | 0  | 0    | 0     | 2     | 0     | 12  | 0                  | 14             |
| 40-44          | 0  | 0    | 0     | 0     | 1     | 5   | 0                  | 6              |
| 45-49          | 0  | 0    | 1     | 0     | 0     | 2   | 0                  | 3              |
| 50<            | 0  | 0    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 1   | 0                  | 1              |
| No answer      | 1  | 0    | 1     | 0     | 2     | 2   | 5                  | 11             |
| Total          | 2  | 16   | 54    | 50    | 30    | 37  | 5                  | 194            |

27.8% (n=54) of the questionnaire sample (n=194) responded that they had decided to go to university between the ages of 11-15 years. 25.8% (n=50) decided to go to university between the ages of 16-20 years old with 19.1% (n=37) deciding at the age of 26 years or above. 15.5% (n=30) of the students decided at the age of 21-25 years old with 8.2% (n=16) deciding between the ages of 6-10 years. 1% (n=2) of the students decided below the age of 5 years old with 2.6% (n=5) of students giving no answer. These figures show that 62.9% (n=122) of the students said that they had decided to enter higher education before the age of twenty years old compared to 34.5% (n=67) of students who decided to enter from the age of twenty-one years old. This signifies that though the age groups of the total sample were almost equally divided between mature students and those aged 20 years or below on entry to the university, significantly more students decided to enter higher education below the age of twenty years old.

Thombs (1997) suggests that mature students have a predisposition to education, but are 'waylaid' by circumstances or other factors (e.g. the need to earn money). Entering into higher education later in life may be a re-establishment of prior values and intentions. Other explanations of these findings may suggest that many mature students are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and did not have the inclination or the opportunity to continue their education earlier in their lives, thus not having sufficient levels of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1993) or 'relational-social capital' (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). One possible explanation links factors such as social class, however, age showed no significance in relation to social class



identification within the questionnaire sample with only slightly more students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university (25.5%) identifying with a particular social class compared to 21.3% of the mature students.

6.4 Access Routes into Higher Education

The access routes of students were examined to evaluate the educational ‘pathways’ followed by students who entered the university. In order to understand the data in relation to access routes into higher education, the access routes used in this project are derived from Thombs (1997). The nine access routes are shown in the following box.

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Route A: | I entered university directly after leaving school.  |
| Route B: | I left school at 16 to go into further education and then entered directly into university.  |
| Route C: | I went into further education from the sixth-form and then entered directly into university.   |
| Route D: | I am a mature student who has entered university through an access course.   |
| Route E: | I am a mature student who has entered university with qualifications other than an access course.  |
| Route F: | I entered university with vocational qualifications.   |
| Route G: | I am a mature student returning to university having previously left another course/ university.   |
| Route H: | I am a mature student with previously gained entrance qualifications entering university after a period of time away from education.                   |
| Route I: | I am under twenty years of age and followed Route A but was involved with non-educational activities before beginning university (e.g. VSO or travel). |

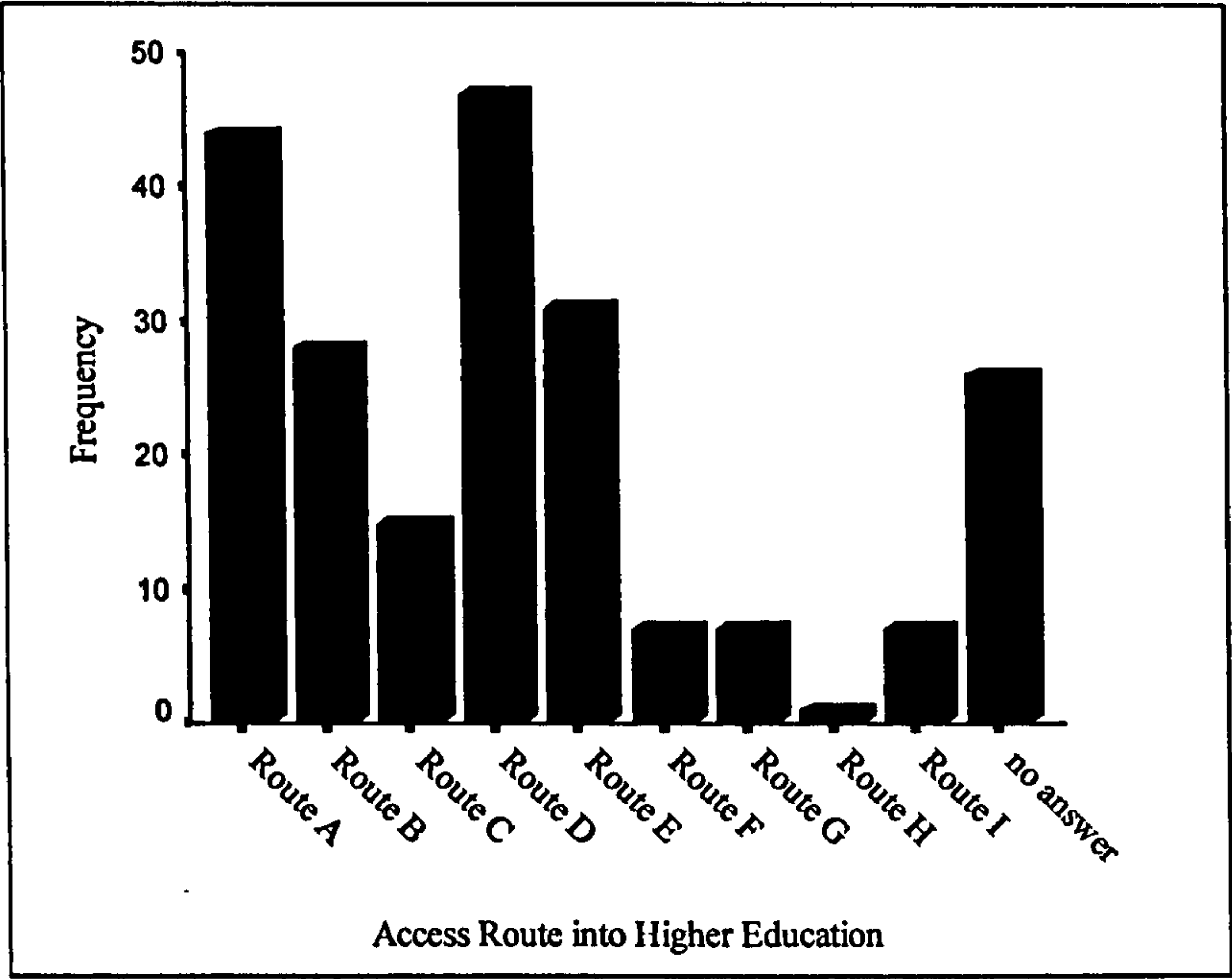
Source: Thombs, W. 1997

The students samples were asked to identify which access route described their route into higher education. The access routes followed by students from the questionnaire survey, focus groups, and interviews are shown on table 6.9 and chart 6.4.

**Table 6.9: Access Routes of Students: All Samples**

| Access Routes  | Students (no.) |
|----------------|----------------|
| Access Route A | 45             |
| Access Route B | 29             |
| Access Route C | 16             |
| Access Route D | 47             |
| Access Route E | 32             |
| Access Route F | 8              |
| Access Route G | 8              |
| Access Route H | 3              |
| Access Route I | 8              |
| No answer      | 26             |
| Total          | 222            |

**Chart 6.4: Access Routes of Students: All Sample**



Access routes into higher education typically are another indication of the high proportion of non-traditional students in higher education (Williams, 1997). Taking into consideration the fact that 26 students did not specify which access route they followed into higher education, half of the remaining students (98 of 196) followed the more ‘traditional’ access routes into higher education (i.e. straight from school, A levels) though half (98 of 196) entered as mature students through the ‘non-traditional’ access routes D to H. These findings reflect a diversity of educational ‘pathways’ and experiences of the student sample prior to entering the university. These changes suggest that the term ‘traditional’ student needs to be re-examined and redefined in the context of this university. The University mission to widening access appears to be confirmed by this data.

**6.4.1 Preparedness for Higher Education**

The qualitative data obtained through the focus groups was examined in relation to how ‘prepared’ students were for their experience within higher education in relation to the access routes the students followed into higher education. The mature students who had undertaken an Access course prior to entry into higher education felt ‘prepared’ for higher education. Examples of this are stated below.



**“Well I did an Access course and I thought that was quite good” (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).**

**“I did an Access course as well and I found it was quite good. It enabled me to structure essays properly, because I had been away from education for so long. So I went back to education, didn’t know how to write or do an assignment properly and the Access course gave me that. Good grounding for when I come to university, that I’d be able to cope with that sort of side of things, study skills, how to read books, skipping and whatever, and looking for books and that sort of thing. So yes, I found it quite good actually. It made things a lot easier” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).**

The above quotes highlight how the students possessed institutional capital, which prepared them for their educational pathway that followed after their attendance on an Access course. Institutional capital was thus beneficial to the students’ perceptions, expectations, and preparedness for higher education. One mature student recognised the benefits of an Access course and commented,

**“I didn’t do an Access course sadly but I wish I had. By the sounds of it everyone seems to have benefitted from it. So my work before was all very much figure related and so therefore doing English I found a bit of a strain, not to learn, but I wouldn’t say that I was prepared” (Respondent 4, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).**

Due to a significant ‘gap’ in their education, many of the mature students who had followed the other non-traditional routes into higher education (access routes D to H) considered they did not know what to expect once they had entered higher education. These students lacked institutional capital that subsequently affected their preparedness for higher education.

**“I’ve done a HNC but I finished that in 1984... I’ve done nothing for twelve years” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).**

**“It’s been too long since my education would make any difference at all really. I hadn’t got any previous experience. The last time I went to college was ’82 so that’s quite a long gap...the courses I did then was for day release so it was pretty flexible” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).**

**“Well I finished my A levels in 1982 and the method used at A level was a lot different in those days than it is to GCSE’s and GNVQ’s now. And so no it didn’t prepare me at all well” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).**

Whilst the ‘gap’ in educational experience was an issue for the mature students, the students who entered higher education 20 years old or below and who had followed access routes A, B, C and I also commented on not being aware of what higher education expected of them. Many of the students who entered the university aged 20 years or below experienced a lack in understanding of how the higher education system worked. One student commented,

“Perhaps in the first or second year in the first semester there should have been lectures to say, you know, right this is how the system works and this is what we expect of you” (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university felt a degree of uncertainty about the standard of work that was expected of them at degree level. They also felt a difference in relation to their experiences of college or sixth-form and their experiences of higher education.

“You haven’t got a clue what level your works at, what they’re expecting or anything, it’s all hit and miss isn’t it really” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I think the assignments are really different as well though because the essays you do at A level are sort of so different to what you do here. And like bibliographies and things like that we never had those at A level, it was a real shock” (Respondent 5, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Those students who entered the university aged 20 years old or below had different experiences of college or sixth-form compared to higher education, particularly in relation to institutional organisation and self-organisation. Examples of students’ comments are,

“I suppose it was good grounding but I mean it’s such a big leap isn’t it from doing GCSE’s, A levels and then on to a degree in that sense” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I don’t think you get the self study. I mean when you come to university it’s more about taking your own, it’s all about organisation isn’t it, self organisation which I don’t think you have that experience even at A level. I stopped at school to do my A levels and really it was just a continuation of school really” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I just think that college was much more organised than when we came here. I didn’t feel prepared for here” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I think you have to be motivated here don’t you because otherwise you just get way behind really. It’s all self organisation” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

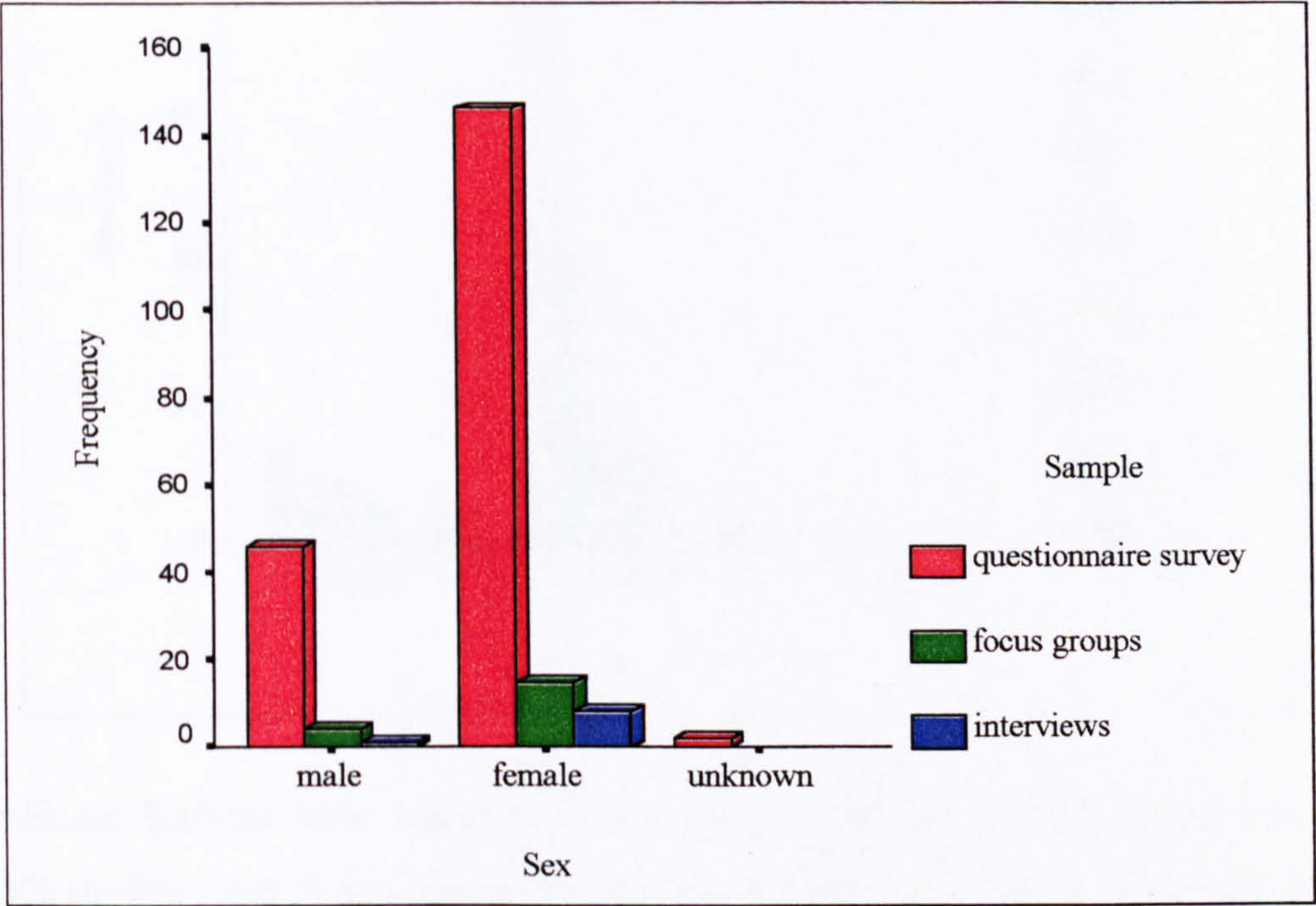
Students’ who had undertaken an Access course felt more prepared for higher education than those students who had been out of education for a significant duration of time, thus displaying higher degrees of institutional capital. Amongst the students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university it was apparent that the expectations of how the higher education system works, and the level of academic work that is expected, were issues for which they felt unprepared. They felt unprepared for the need for self-organisation, and recognised a significance difference between their experiences of sixth-form or college and university.



6.5 Gender

The quantitative and qualitative samples were asked to state to which sex they belonged and the data representing is shown on chart 6.5.

**Chart 6.5: Sex of Students: All Sample**

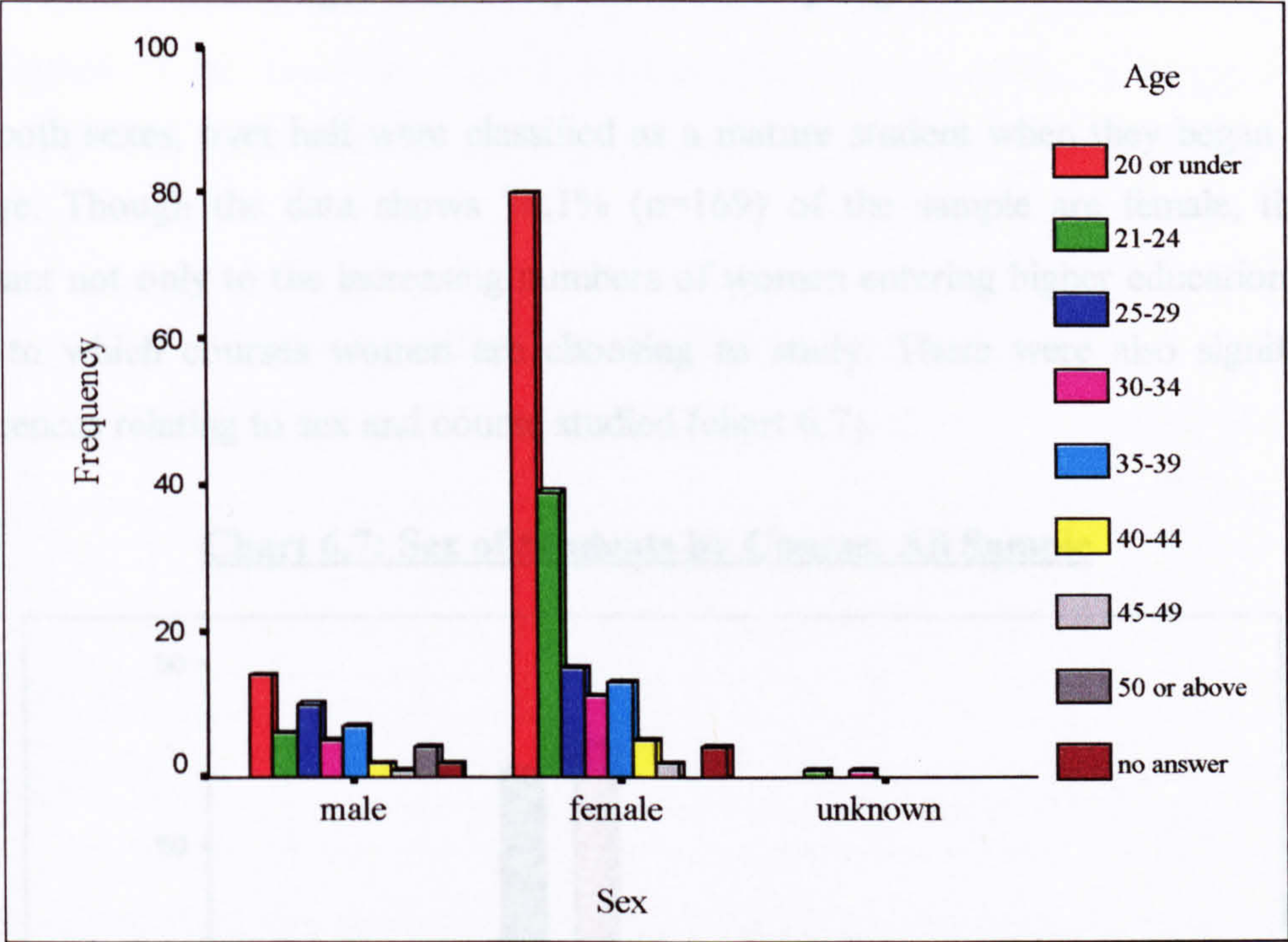


The majority (169 of 222) of the student samples were female. The data reveals that significantly more women than men in this sample chose to study Education courses in this particular university.

The sample consisted of 222 students of which 76.1% (n=169) were female and 30% (n=51) were male, with 0.9% (n=2) students not specifying their sex.



**Chart 6.6: Sex by Age of Students: All Sample**



Significant findings were found in relation to sex and age. Of the female students 47.3% (n=80) were 20 years or under when they began their course. 23.1% (n=39) of the female students were 21-24 years old and 8.9% (n=15) were 25-29 years old. 6.5% (n=11) were 30-34 years old and 7.7% (n=13) were 35-39 years old. 3% (n=5) of female students between the ages of 40-44 years old when they began their course, and 1.2% (n=2) who were 45-49 years old. 1.2% (n=2) of female students began their course over the age of fifty years and 2.5% (n=4) female students did not state their age. Just below half (47.3%) of the female students began their course at or below the age of 20 years old, compared to the majority (52.7%) who began their course as mature students (i.e. 21 years old or above).

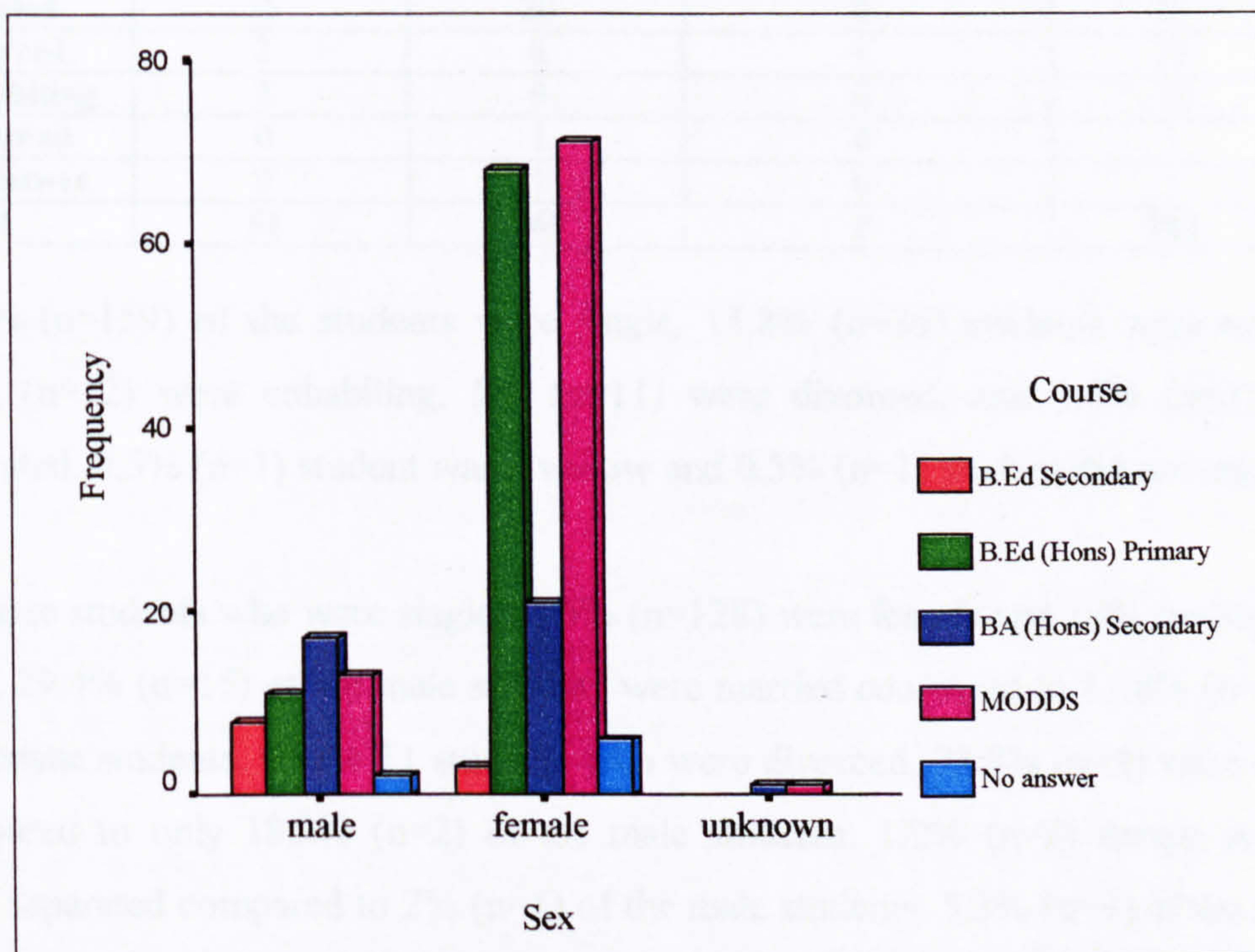
Of the male students (n=51), 27.5% (n=14) were 20 years or under at the beginning of their higher education, 11.8% (n=6) were 21-24 years old and 19.6% (n=10) were 25-29 years old at the commencement of their course. 9.8% (n=5) were aged between 30-34 years old, and 13.7% (n=7) were 35-39 years old. 3.9% (n=2) were aged between 40-44 years, and 1.9% (n=1) was aged between 45-49 years, leaving 3.9% (n=2) of male students aged 50 years or above when they began their course. 3.9%



(n=2) of the male students did not state their age. The majority of the male students were mature students, aged above 21 years when they began their course.

For both sexes, over half were classified as a mature student when they began their course. Though the data shows 76.1% (n=169) of the sample are female, this is relevant not only to the increasing numbers of women entering higher education, but also to which courses women are choosing to study. There were also significant differences relating to sex and course studied (chart 6.7).

**Chart 6.7: Sex of Students by Course: All Sample**



Women were more likely to study the B.Ed Primary course with 40.2% (n=68) of all female students qualifying to teach in Primary education compared to 21.6% (n=11) of all male students. The male students were slightly more likely to study B.Ed or BA Secondary courses with 49% (n=25) qualifying to teach Secondary education compared to 13.6% (n=23) of all female students. There were more female students on the Combined Studies in Education course with 42% (n=71) of all the female students compared to 25.5% (n=13) of male students. The female students in the sample, therefore, were more likely to study Education as a modular programme of study. Men, however, were more likely to study B.Ed Secondary courses at the university.



6.5.1 Marital Status

Marital status was considered to be a potentially influential factor in relation to issues of support of an academic and a non-academic nature whilst studying at the university. The students from all samples were asked for their marital status (table 6.10).

**Table 6.10: Gender by Marital Status: All Sample**

| Marital Status | Male (no.) | Female (no.) | No answer (no.) | Total (no.) |
|----------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Single         | 30         | 128          | 1               | 159         |
| Separated      | 1          | 2            | 0               | 3           |
| Married        | 15         | 20           | 0               | 35          |
| Divorced       | 2          | 8            | 1               | 11          |
| Cohabiting     | 3          | 9            | 0               | 12          |
| Widowed        | 0          | 1            | 0               | 1           |
| No answer      | 0          | 1            | 0               | 1           |
| Total          | 51         | 169          | 2               | 222         |

71.6% (n=159) of the students were single, 15.8% (n=35) students were married, 5.4% (n=12) were cohabiting, 5% (n=11) were divorced, and 1.4% (n=3) were separated. 0.5% (n=1) student was a widow and 0.5% (n=1) student did not answer.

Of those students who were single 80.5% (n=128) were female and 19% (n=30) were male. 29.4% (n=15) of the male students were married compared to 11.8% (n=20) of the female students. Of the 11 students who were divorced, 72.8% (n=8) were female compared to only 18.2% (n=2) of the male students. 1.2% (n=2) female students were separated compared to 2% (n=1) of the male students. 5.3% (n=9) of the female students were cohabiting compared to 5.9% (n=3) of the male students. The data reveals that a high proportion of the sample were single with only 21.2% (n=47) students either married or living with a partner. A higher percentage of the male students were married or cohabiting than female students. This may be a reflection of the high number of female students who entered the university as traditional aged students i.e. twenty years or below.

6.5.2 Support from Spouse/Partner

Those students who were married or living with a partner considered that they received a lot of support and help which was beneficial to them whilst studying in higher education, particularly in relation to child care. These students had, therefore,



experienced, to varying degrees, relational-social capital through support. Some of the students commented that they often felt that their academic work had taken precedence at times over their family life. This is discussed further in section 6.5.3.

6.5.3 Dependents

It was considered important to identify whether the students’ studying at the university had any dependent children or relatives that may impact on their educational experiences. Any child or relative the student was responsible for financially and emotionally, as a guardian or parent, was classified as a dependent. The data shown on table 6.11 is representative of the questionnaire sample only.

**Table 6.11: Gender by Dependent Children: Questionnaire Sample**

| Sex       | Dependent Children (no.) |     |           | Total (no.) |
|-----------|--------------------------|-----|-----------|-------------|
|           | Yes                      | No  | No Answer |             |
| Male      | 11                       | 34  | 1         | 46          |
| Female    | 30                       | 113 | 3         | 146         |
| No Answer | 0                        | 2   | 0         | 2           |
| Total     | 41                       | 149 | 4         | 194         |

A total of 21.2% (n=41) students had dependent children whom they cared for. Of these 41 students, 73.2% (n=30) were female students whilst 26.8% (n=11) were male students. More male students were married or cohabiting than female students, though more female students were single-parent families with dependent children.

Of the 41 students who had dependent children, 31.7% (n=13) were single-parent families raising children in their own home. This included students who categorised themselves as single, separated or divorced. The data is representative of the questionnaire sample only and is shown on table 6.12.

**Table 6.12: Marital Status by Dependent Children: Questionnaire Sample**

| Marital Status | Dependent Children (no.) |     |           | Total (no.) |
|----------------|--------------------------|-----|-----------|-------------|
|                | Yes                      | No  | No Answer |             |
| Single         | 5                        | 134 | 4         | 143         |
| Separated      | 3                        | 0   | 0         | 3           |
| Married        | 22                       | 8   | 0         | 30          |
| Divorced       | 5                        | 3   | 0         | 8           |
| Cohabiting     | 6                        | 3   | 0         | 9           |
| No Answer      | 0                        | 2   | 0         | 1           |
| Total          | 41                       | 149 | 4         | 194         |

The focus group discussions provided an insight into the experiences of those students with families and dependents in relation to the impact of family life and dependents on academic life. Those students with a partner and/or dependent children were asked how their relationships and responsibilities, if at all, had implications on their studies at university. The students made comments such as,

“All of us have family...Fortunately I’ve got a very helpful and understanding wife. Without her help I would have really, really struggled...I’ve had not a lot to do with my daughter over the last two years during the university time. I make up for it a bit more in the holiday time and the summer holiday. But it has meant that it’s affected me, certainly my personal life...obviously we’ve got to get the work done” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“I’ve become snappy and horrible to live with, you know, get out the way this piece of papers more important sort of thing. And it’s awful...and you’ve got to meet that deadline. It’s hard. It is hard on people with children, with families and work and everything else” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I’ve missed out on a lot of days like that, days that you just can’t get back because your children have aged two years and you just can’t get those days back” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“If it hadn’t have been for my mom I wouldn’t have been able to do it. It’s been too much really...And when it’s been coming to assignment times my whole family have been like “you’ll have to have them today, you’ll have to have them today”. Well they’re only six and four now so they’ve been quite young so I’ve sort of gone along the premise that by the time I’ve finished they’d have forgotten all this, they’d have abandoned the memory” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The mature students, with dependent children found it ‘difficult’ to manage both their academic lives and personal lives. The most significant finding is the time that they felt they had lost with their children, particularly when the children were young in age. Relational-social capital found through the support of their families was an important factor in enabling the students to cope and manage their lives whilst studying. Family support provided by both partners and immediate family members was found to be vital in relation to child-care and support, exemplifying degrees of relational-social capital.

The individual access route interviews focused more closely on the affects of having dependents whilst trying to obtain a degree qualification as a full-time student. It was found that those students with dependent children had made a conscious decision to return to higher education. Prior to entering higher education they were aware of the possible difficulties they may have encountered though too often have found the reality imposing additional problems. Students from access routes A to C and access



route I were traditional students of which none had dependents of any kind. Students from access routes D to H were classed as mature students of which dependency varied from children to family responsibilities. The ‘limitations’ imposed by having dependents are expressed in the quotes below.

“I don’t have the freedom to come and go in and out of the library when I want or sat and mixed more socially with some of the other students which probably could be beneficial...if you don’t have that network you have to rely on yourself...But again it’s things that you compensate for because it’s nice to have the family as well. You just rearrange your life again” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“All my family are dependent on me because I’m the only one who can drive and I’m the only one who can really speak English and although my sister can but they expect me to do everything...I wish I had an older brother who could have the responsibility sometimes” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs, Asian).

“Time, money, and also if I want to have that extra two hours and keep him occupied it’s like do you want to go swimming, do you want to go to the play centre...childcare is a big one” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

These quotes highlight the pressures students with dependent children or family members face and how these may impose constraints on their academic lives, giving rise to a range of coping strategies. The problem of available child-care for those students with children appeared to be a huge concern that imposed restrictions and difficulties on their time and day-to-day lives. Students commented on having to rearrange their lives to accommodate for their responsibilities both inside and outside of the university that resulted in their degree of freedom being significantly reduced.

6.6 Ethnic Group Membership

Students were asked which ethnic group they identified themselves as belonging to. The data for all samples are shown on table 6.13.

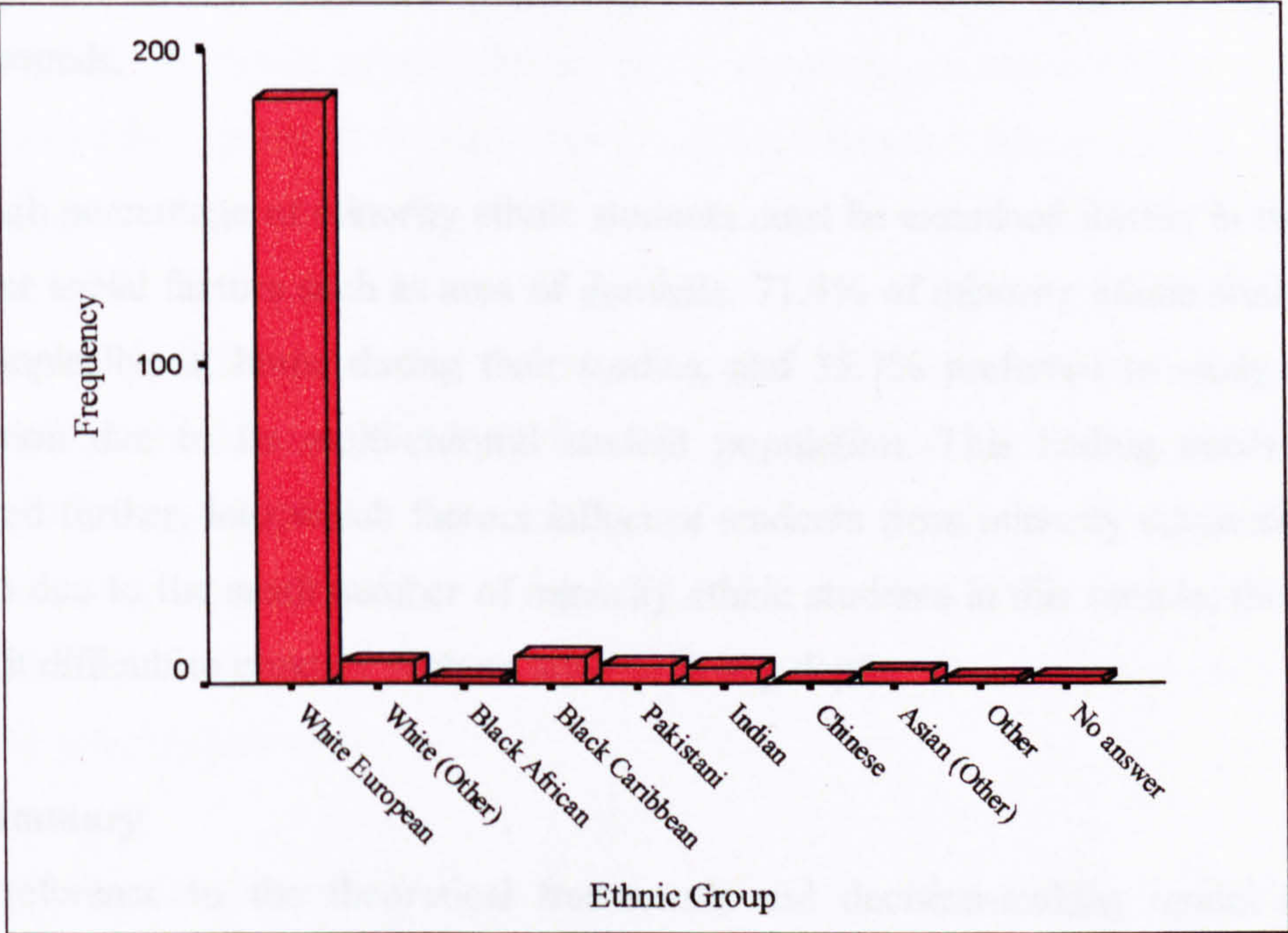
Table 6.13: Ethnicity of Students by Sample

| Ethnic Group    | Samples (no.)        |              |            | Total (no.) |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|------------|-------------|
|                 | Questionnaire Survey | Focus Groups | Interviews |             |
| White European  | 162                  | 15           | 7          | 184         |
| White (Other)   | 6                    | 1            | 0          | 7           |
| Black African   | 2                    | 0            | 0          | 2           |
| Black Caribbean | 6                    | 2            | 1          | 8           |
| Pakistani       | 5                    | 0            | 1          | 6           |
| Indian          | 5                    | 0            | 0          | 5           |
| Chinese         | 1                    | 0            | 0          | 1           |
| Asian (Other)   | 3                    | 1            | 0          | 4           |
| Other           | 2                    | 0            | 0          | 2           |
| No Answer       | 2                    | 0            | 0          | 2           |
| Total           | 194                  | 19           | 9          | 222         |



82.9% (n=184) of the questionnaire survey, focus groups, and access route interview student samples were of ethnic group White European whilst 3.2% (n=7) of students' were White Other. 0.9% (n=2) of the students were Black African and 4.1%(n=9) were Black Caribbean, with no student represented as Black Other. There were no Bangladeshi students, though 2.7% (n=6) classified themselves as Pakistani and 2.3% (n=5) Indian. 0.5% (n=1) student defined their ethnic group as Chinese and 1.8% (n=4) as Asian Other. 0.9% (n=2) students classified their ethnic group as 'Other' and 0.9% (n=2) students who did not state their ethnic group (chart 6.8).

**Chart 6.8: Ethnic Groups of Students: All Sample**



In Britain 4.7% of the population are from minority ethnic groups (Jones, 1997). This research found, however, that 16.9% of the samples were from minority ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that minority ethnic students are ‘over-represented’, that being, the percentage of minority ethnic students within the student population at the university is higher than the percentage in the general population within the UK. Differences in attendance rates at the university existed between minority ethnic groups, as there were no Bangladeshi students in the sample. These findings support the debate put forward by Modood (1993), that it is not merely an issue of whether minority ethnic groups are represented in higher education, but which minority



ethnic groups are entering higher education and which courses they are studying. It also confirms the relative success of the Access mission of the University.

Students who were part of the questionnaire sample (n=194) were asked whether they had to resit any of their examinations before qualifying to enter higher education. Only 10.3% (n=20) of the students had to resit any examinations before entering higher education. Of these students who had to take resit examinations 80% (n=16) were of ethnic group White (European), 5% (n=1) belonging to ethnic group White (Other), 10% (n=2) Indian and 5% (n=1) Asian (Other). Only 10.3% of the students had to resit an examination and of these 20% were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The high percentage of minority ethnic students must be examined further in the light of other social factors such as area of domicile. 71.4% of minority ethnic students in the sample live at home during their studies, and 35.7% preferred to study at this institution due to its multi-cultural student population. This finding needs to be explored further, into which factors influence students from minority ethnic choices, though due to the small number of minority ethnic students in this sample, this study found it difficult to conduct such an analysis in any depth.

## 6.7 Summary

With reference to the theoretical framework and decision-making model of this study, the samples personal characteristics were found to be significant in three areas, these being: social class; gender; age and related lifestyles.

The lack of social class identification amongst the students highlighted the degrees to which students feel 'classless' whilst studying. This suggests that the students identify social class through occupation and thereby not belonging to a social class whilst a student in higher education. Those students who did specify a social class were mainly from the middle classes, reinforcing the recognised lack of students in higher education from social class groups IV and V.

The high numbers of women found in the samples in this study reinforces debates surrounding the over-representation of women studying Education, particularly

Primary Education. However, in relation to minority ethnic students the findings of this study contradict arguments that few minority ethnic students study Education, as 16.9% of the samples were from minority ethnic groups.

The most significant personal characteristic that influenced entry to, and subsequent experiences of, higher education was age, though not age per se, rather the lifestyles and factors associated with particular age groups. Age itself was only influential, therefore, in conjunction with the varying degrees of relational-social capital and cultural capital available to the students. The life paths associated with age, such as previous educational experiences, access routes followed into higher education, and the possibility of family responsibilities and dependents, all had a greater influence on the students degrees of preparedness for higher education than any other personal characteristic.

Also, the majority of the students entered the university as mature students, and this had implications for the term 'traditional' student. The role of the 'traditional' student no longer applies to the majority of the student population, and this was reinforced through the findings of this study. The decrease in numbers of the once 'traditional' student invites further research into the changing roles and identities of students in higher education.

The next chapter (Chapter 7) explores the reasons for which students entered higher education, and the subsequent images the students held of university education and life.



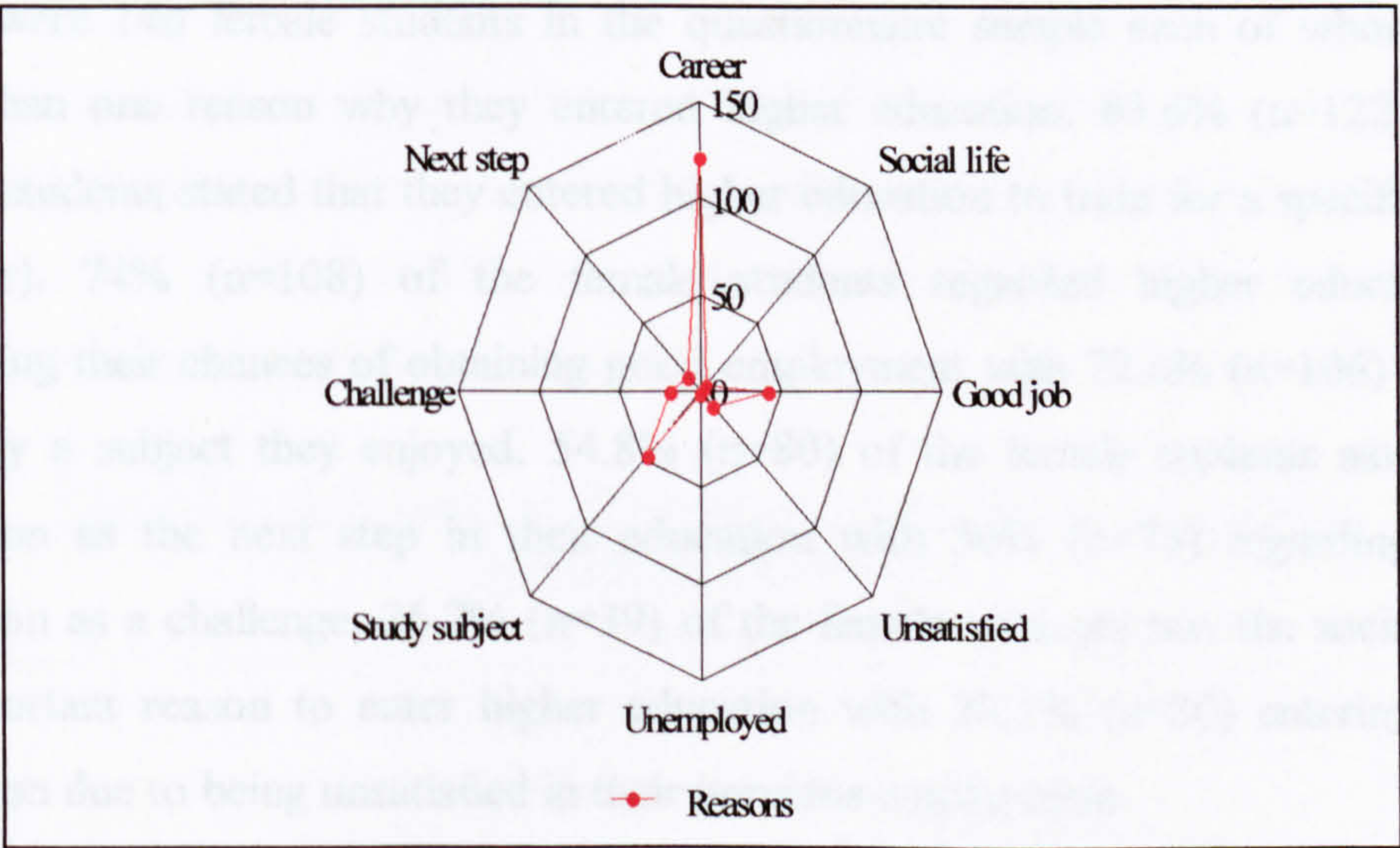
## Chapter 7: Reasons for Entering and Images of Higher Education

The previous educational expectations of students are important in understanding the current higher educational experiences of students. The questionnaire survey, focus group interview, and access route interview samples were questioned about their reasons for entering higher education, the significant influences on their decision, and their preconceived images of higher education prior to entry.

### 7.1 Reasons for Entering Higher Education

The questionnaire sample was asked to specify the reasons why they entered higher education. The students could specify more than one answer (chart 7.1).

**Chart 7.1: Reasons for Entering Higher Education: Questionnaire Sample**



A majority of 47.3% (n=122) of the students entered higher education in order to train for a specific career. 18.2% (n=47) of the students wanted to study a subject they would enjoy whilst 16.3% (n=42) entered higher education to enhance their prospects of entering a good job after graduation. 7.4% (n=19) of the students saw higher education as a personal challenge and 4.3% (n=11) saw it as the next step in their education after college. 4.3% (n=11) of the students entered higher education due to being unsatisfied in their previous employment. Few students entered higher education for the social life or due to unemployment, with the figures being 1.9% (n=5) and 0.4% (n=1) respectively.



Significant differences in relation to sex and reasons for entering higher education was found through the questionnaire survey. The students again could specify more than one answer. There were 46 male students in the questionnaire sample. Of those male students 89.1% (n=41) stated that they entered higher education to train for a specific career. 71.7% (n=33) stated that they wanted to study a subject they enjoyed whilst 65.2% (n=30) answered that studying in higher education would improve their chances of obtaining good employment. 41.3% (n=19) of the male students regarded higher education as a challenge. 39% (n=18) of the male students stated that they entered higher education due to being unsatisfied in their previous employment. 30.4% (n=14) of the students saw higher education as the next step in their education with 28.3% (n=13) regarding the social life higher education offered as an important reason for entering higher education.

There were 146 female students in the questionnaire sample each of whom stated more than one reason why they entered higher education. 83.6% (n=122) of the female students stated that they entered higher education to train for a specific career (teacher). 74% (n=108) of the female students regarded higher education as improving their chances of obtaining good employment with 72.6% (n=106) wanting to study a subject they enjoyed. 54.8% (n=80) of the female students saw higher education as the next step in their education with 50% (n=73) regarding higher education as a challenge. 26.7% (n=39) of the female students saw the social life as an important reason to enter higher education with 20.5% (n=30) entering higher education due to being unsatisfied in their previous employment.

Both male (41 of 46) and female (122 of 146) students saw training for a specific career as the most important reason for entering higher education. A higher percentage of female students (74%) compared to male students (41.3%) however, saw higher education as improving their chances of obtaining a good job. 72.6% of female students and similarly 71.7% of male students wanted to study a subject they enjoyed, with more male students (28.3%) than female students (26.7%) being attracted to the social life university life offered. Almost half (n=92) of the questionnaire sample saw higher education as a personal challenge. 39% of male students and 20.5% of female students entered higher education due to dissatisfaction in their previous employment.

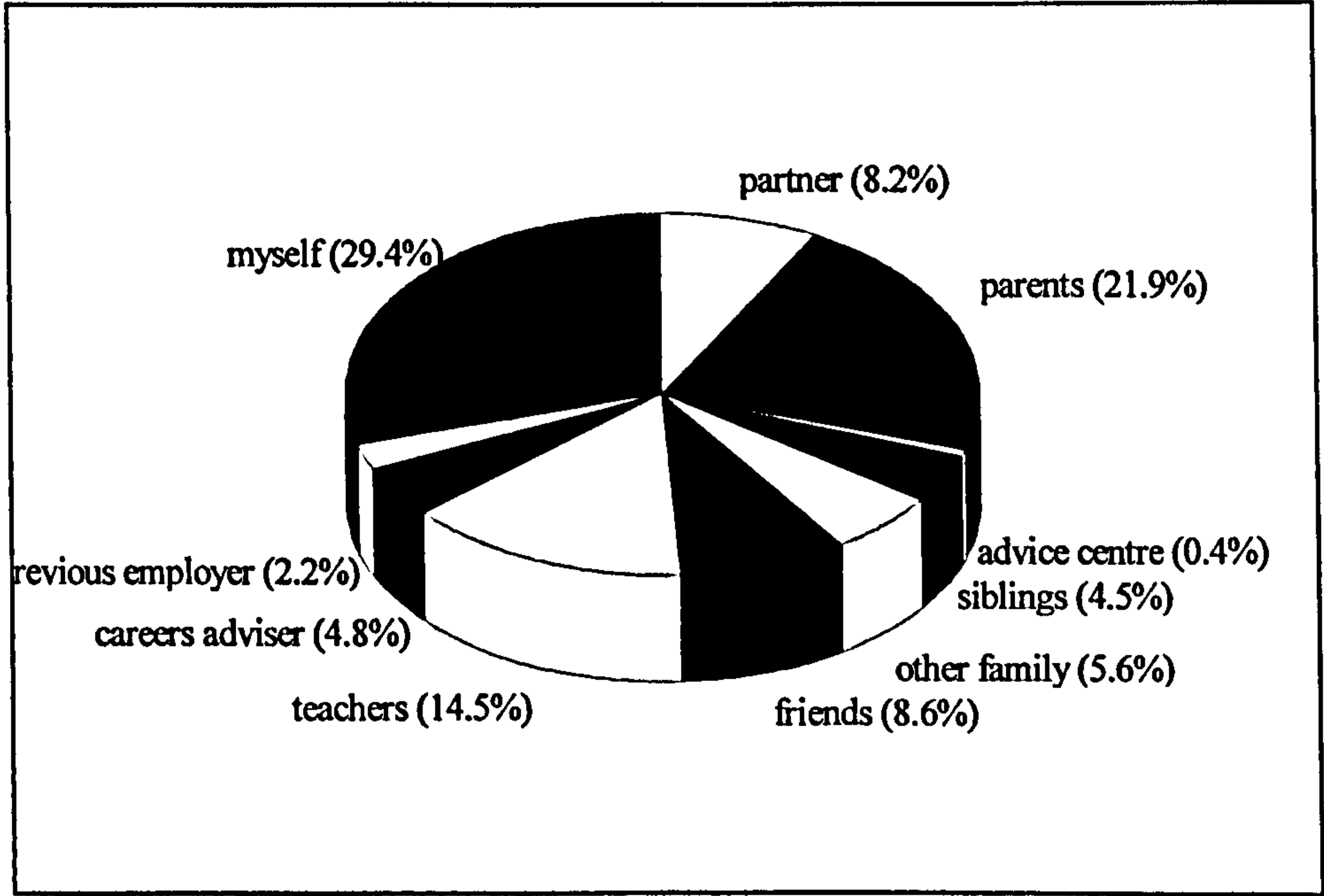


The data reveals that 163 students entered higher education with the intention of qualifying for a specific career, and 138 saw higher education as improving their chances of entering a good occupation. Newstead et al (1997) put forward three categories that each provided an explanation into why students enter higher education, these being as a ‘stop gap’, as a means to an end, and for personal development (see page 41). The findings of this study have reflected that the students entered the university for a combination of all three categories. The first category of ‘stop gap’ was important to 52 students, with higher education regarded as a ‘means to an end’ (qualifying for a career, improving career chances, dissatisfied with previous employment) as the most popular reason to enter higher education. 139 students entered higher education for ‘personal development’ reasons (i.e. studying an enjoyable subject). These findings may be explained, however, by the courses in the sample that were mostly vocationally orientated.

**7.2 Significant Influences on Decision to Enter Higher Education**

The students were asked which individuals influenced their decision to enter higher education. The students could state more than one answer. The data from the questionnaire sample is shown on chart 7.2.

**Chart 7.2: Influences on Decision to Enter Higher Education:  
Questionnaire Sample**



29.4% (n=79) of the students stated that no-one influenced their decision to enter higher education, and that it was purely their own decision. 21.9% (n=22) stated that their parents influenced their decision, exemplifying degrees of human capital and relational-social capital, with 14.5% (n=39) stating that their teachers at their previous education institution (institutional capital) were influential on their decision to enter higher education. 8.6% (n=23) stated that their friends influenced their decision to enter higher education. Other family members and siblings were influential to 5.6% (n=15) and 4.5% (n=12) students respectively. Few students said they were influenced by a previous employer, a careers adviser, or an advice centre, being 2.2% (n=6), 4.8% (n=13), and 0.4% (n=1) respectively. The majority of the students (70.6%) recognised that someone (i.e. family, friends, teachers) had influenced their decision to enter higher education. However, 29.4% of the students stated that the decision to enter higher education was purely their own. In the light of the theoretical framework of this study, this finding invites further investigation into the level of awareness individuals have of the degree to which wider macro and meso may influence their choices and to the extent of their awareness of such factors or their adherence to an ideology of 'personal responsibility'. This data, therefore, should be representative of the students' interpretations of their own realities, though may not fully take into account the possible influence of wider macro and meso factors.

### 7.3 Image of University Life

The students who participated in the focus group interviews (n=19) were asked what their expectations of higher education were prior to entry. Students either had no image of university life or an unrealistic image influenced by various factors. The lack of realism in students' expectations of higher education and university life was strongly represented through the students' comments.

"I'm trying to think of that film I saw. Educating Rita. Did you see that? Something like that. With lecturers walking around with great big gowns on and things like that. An old fashioned image but that's what I pictured. And obviously it's nothing like that" (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"The only experience I got was when I went to see my brother who was at Oxford so I mean their teacher ration is what, one to three or something silly. So that's the only experience I got" (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).



**“It was quite different for me because I went to the local university in my country and the environment was totally different. It’s more freedom here...In my university in my country students are very, very, limited freedom. Things like, no party. They have to concentrate on their studies, and things like attendance, it’s compulsory. If you don’t attend a few times for lectures you will be expelled, very, very strict. Here, you know, you don’t have to come to class” (Respondent 2, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).**

Images of university life were strongly affected by the intentions of the students and their reasons for entering higher education. Mature students who had remained at home and had family commitments felt they were studying to gain their education and the ‘qualification’, and that a student social life was not a consideration for them. These students did not have a particular image of themselves but instead an image of the ‘traditional’ students in higher education, an image they could not apply to their own position as a mature student. Comments included,

**“I didn’t have much of a preconceived idea really because I knew it would be different for me than it would be for students coming straight from school. Because like us all with family commitments and work commitments I knew it was always going to be different for us than the others” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).**

**“I’m just going to be there to work and go home and that’s it. So I didn’t really have like, well this is the image I’m going to fit into, it was just like, well I’m going there to work and that’s it. I’m not going there to actually socialise and party and whatever so” (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).**

There were significant differences between those students who had moved away from home to study, and those students who had remained at home and studied at their local university, in relation to their image of university life. Both groups had different expectations of university life as a result of their choice of either studying at or away from home. This finding is reflected in the following quotes.

**“I think it would have been different, I mean I stopped at home. I think it would have been different had I of been a student and moved into the area. I thought you’d mix more...I’ve gone to friends who have been away and stopped and it’s been different. I think it’s just a different lifestyle isn’t it really when you go away” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).**

**“But I mean, I don’t know I suppose for me it was move away from home. Also I think it’s very different for students that move away from home to students who stay at home. For me it was become an independent person moving away from home being financially independent or not as it might be phone dad every half term...Making friends was a really, I was quite excited about that, meeting new people and different people because coming from Cornwall it’s very different” (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).**

The concept of a ‘real’ student in higher education was a significant factor on the image of higher education and student life. ‘Real’ students were considered to be those of aged twenty years old or below on entry to university and who moved away

from home to study, and besides studying, experienced the social side of university life possibly through residence on campus. References to 'real' students are evident in the following quotes.

"But I mean when you see like, especially having that time in Telford and the students there were like real students, no disrespect to you pair but you know what I mean, who like live there and had a student life, that was how I expected it to be really" (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I didn't really, well I suppose I did have an image but it was an image that I thought I wouldn't be fitting in for me anyway because you usually have the image of the eighteen year olds going off to university, partying all night and sort of you know, doing no work and handing it in and getting like, you know, just barely passing and whatever, and sort of partying again all night, and well that's not going to be me anyway" (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

Only one student commented that their expectations and image of university life were representative of the reality. This was due to their experiences on an Access course prior to entry into higher education.

"I just expected it to be like the Access really, which it is in a lot ways. Its just sort of progression and it's no big shocks" (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

The majority of the mature students thus appeared to hold unrealistic images of both higher education and university life prior to entering higher education. Mature students, however, did not have the expectation of being what they regarded as a 'real' student, that being aged twenty years or below on entry to university, living away from home, and experiencing both the academic and the social side of university life. In comparison, however, students' aged twenty years or below when they entered the university had mixed images of university life mainly affected by whether they remained at home or moved away from home to study. Those students who moved away from home had the image of experiencing the student social life more than those who had remained at home to study. This finding was highlighted in the access route interviews. One student commented,

"I know it would be bigger than college but I didn't realise it would be so impersonal than college...I didn't realise there would be so much of a divide between people who live here and people who don't which I think is a big thing" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs)

The access route interviews reinforced findings found through the questionnaire survey and the focus groups. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university had concerns and expectations in relation to the student life in terms of socialising and meeting new people, whereas the mature students (those aged 21 year



old or above on entry) did not expect the same experiences and expected the course to be much harder than they actually found it to be. Traditional students commented,

“Probably the social side more than anything else. Meeting friends and an opportunity to sort of start again...I wasn’t expecting particularly lots and lots of work. But I thought it would be more formal which I haven’t really found. But more the social side...just really meeting new friends and that sort of thing” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“It’s how I expected it to be, like fun, everyone, it was, because I was quite nervous about coming but then when I thought about it I thought well everyone’s going to be in exactly the same boat, no-one knows each other...I expected the union maybe to be a bit more ‘pubby’...But yes it was like I expected it to be” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I thought it would be hard, difficult. I thought university education would be difficult but it’s not as difficult as I thought it would be. I don’t know maybe that’s different for different universities or different courses but I thought it would be a really difficult university but it wasn’t that difficult as I thought” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I expected it to be scary and sort of I was worried about making friends and stuff and the social aspects” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Many of the mature students expected the academic side of university to be much more difficult than they found after beginning their course. A few of the mature students commented,

“I expected it to be extremely academic and a lot more difficult than I found. Because my experience of education has been so dire...but I knew I needed to do something to improve. My expectations were quite high but I was quite afraid that I wasn’t going to be able to fit in and cope with it but that hasn’t happened at all...I just expected everybody to be so much cleverer than I was and so academic and so much better at expressing themselves and just knowing what was going on more than I was. But it wasn’t like that at all. I was quite open minded, thought it was something I’ve got to do. Just throw myself into it and see what happens” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I thought it was going to be very difficult because I actually applied for university when I was eighteen and then didn’t get the A level results I wanted and couldn’t be bothered with clearing and decided, you know, it’s just not worth it...So I thought that because I’d been out of education for so long that I was going to have to work my guts out just to sort of, to keep up” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The students who entered higher education aged twenty years or below had expectations more so in relation to their experiences of the social side of student life, whilst the mature students had high expectations of what would be expected of them academically. These findings highlight the difference in the perceived role of being a ‘student’, particularly in relation to age. The students aged twenty years or below on entry were much more likely than the mature students to expect to experience the social side of university life. Both groups had definite expectations and images of

what university life would involve, many of which either only partly met their expectations, or were a complete contrast.

#### 7.4 Summary

The reasons why the students entered higher education, the significant influences on their decisions to enter higher education, and the students' images of university prior to entry, were all significant in relation to the theoretical framework and model of this study.

The majority of the students entered the university to train for a specific career, which is not surprising given that most of the students were studying teacher training qualifications. The findings of this study reinforced Newsteads (1997) categories of why students enter higher education, finding that the students entered higher education as either a 'stop gap', a means to an end, and/or for personal development.

Significant influences on the students' decisions to enter higher education were found to be parents, teachers, friends, and other family members. Friends were found to be most influential on the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university highlighting significant degrees of relational-social capital through supporting networks. These findings also highlight the degrees of cultural capital within the students' environments and how cultural capital, to varying degrees, influenced the students' perceptions of their available options, and subsequently their 'choices' to enter into higher education.

The students' images of university life prior to entering the university revealed varying degrees of, or a lack of, 'realism' that was determined by the students' previous experiences. The image of the 'traditional' student was prominent within the perceptions of students of all ages and from all backgrounds. Students images of university life and how they saw themselves fitting into that image, was significantly influenced by their images of the 'real' or the 'traditional' student image.

The students pre-conceived images were found to be unrealistic and had an impact on the eventual experiences of the students whilst in higher education. Students degrees of 'preparedness' prior to entering the university were, therefore, influenced



by preconceived notions and images of university life, and in particular images of the 'real' or the 'traditional' student, an image most of the students, particularly those within the mature students age ranges, felt they could never fit into.

These findings support the incorporation of the concept of 'preparedness' in the theoretical model of this study, and recognise the significance of the students' perceptions, images, and expectations of university life prior to entering the university on their experiences of higher education.

The following chapter (Chapter 8) discusses the reasons why the student samples chose the university and their course of study.

## **Chapter 8: Reasons for Choosing the University and the Course**

The questionnaire (n=194), focus group (n=19), and access route interview (n=9) samples were asked which universities they had applied to (not including the University of Wolverhampton) whilst choosing a place to study. The aim was to investigate the extent to which students' chose universities on the basis of locality. The students were also asked why they chose to study at the University of Wolverhampton and why they chose their course of study. It is important to understand which factors students' say determine their choices.

### **8.1 Reasons for Choosing University of Wolverhampton**

The questionnaire sample was asked to state which universities they had applied to (not including the University of Wolverhampton) whilst choosing a place to study, and could specify between one and six universities.

Of the 274 university choices specified by the questionnaire sample, the majority were either in the Midlands area or the North of England. The most popular choices were in the Midlands area as 44.8% (n=87) of the students had applied for a university place, followed by 35.6% (n=69) who applied to a university in the North of England. 20.6% (n=40) of the students had applied to universities in the South West area compared to 4.1% (n=18) students who applied to a university in the South East area. 12.9% (n=25) had applied to a university in East Anglia, and 6.2% (n=12) to a university in Greater London. 6.7% (n=13) of the students applied to a university in Wales and 5.2% (n=10) applied to a university in Scotland. 44.8% (n=87) of students had applied to other institutions of higher education in the Midlands area. These findings very much suggest a 'regional' rather than a national focus to choice of institution.

The questionnaire sample was asked whether their decision to study at the university was influenced by the distance of the university from their home region and location. The question enabled an evaluation of whether the university was local to the students. The findings are shown on table 8.1.



**Table 8.1: Influence of Distance from Home on University Choice:  
Questionnaire Sample**

| Distance from Home        | Students (no.) |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Living at home            | 100            |
| Living near to home       | 20             |
| Live away from home       | 25             |
| Live far away from home   | 6              |
| Distance had no influence | 36             |
| No answer                 | 7              |
| Total                     | 194            |

The majority (100 of 194) of the students wanted to remain living at home whilst studying at the university and, therefore, were influenced by the distance of the university from their home when choosing the university. These findings belie the image of the ‘traditional’ student, that being one who lives away from home whilst studying in higher education. These findings also reflect the national trend of increasing number of students remaining at home and attending their local university or institution of higher education. These findings imply, therefore, that the location of the university played an important and influential role for the questionnaire sample in deciding where to study.

The access route interviews sample was asked why they chose to study specifically at the university. The findings reinforced those found by the questionnaire survey, that being, over half of the students (5 of 9) wanted to remain at home and at their local university, of which all but one were mature students. Students’ comments included,

“I wanted to stay local...and I purely came here because it was a B.Ed, I didn’t really look into the university life or anything because it was just the fact that I wanted to stay local and they did the course here I wanted to do...I was blind as what I was coming into” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I live in Birmingham...so I thought oh that’s good I’ll choose Wolverhampton. I don’t want to make life difficult for myself” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“I chose Wolverhampton basically because out of all the local universities it was the one that I could tailor the course to things I was interested in...I went through every prospectus for all the universities within a reasonable driving range” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“This was the only one offering the course locally...I think because the culture I come from because I’m the eldest, I’m the only son...my family expects me to stay at home and do the things that they expect a son to do. Maybe that’s the culture I come from. Maybe different for somebody from a white background or from Afro-Caribbean background” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs, Asian).

“Location basically...I didn’t even know it was split into different sites...I didn’t want to move away from the Midlands so” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29).

Most of the students (5 of 9) chose the university due to the locality. The majority of the students either wanted to remain local or at home whilst studying though a few of the students aged twenty years or below on entry (access routes A, B, and I) chose the university as it was a suitable distance away from their home region. One student (access route F) stayed at home due to family responsibilities, and acknowledged the impact of his culture on his choices highlighting the effect of cultural capital on the students’ perceived opportunities and expectations. The course also played an influential role on the students’ decisions to study at the university. The students stated that the course suited their needs and professional interests and was a basis for choosing to study at the university.

In the research, it was important too to examine how students made the decision to study at the university and what information was used to help make that decision.

8.2 Information Used to Choose University

Students were asked to specify what kind of information they had used to choose to study at the university. Students could specify more than one method of information provision. By obtaining data relating to information provision and use, evidence could be used to identify the extent to which students were making informed decisions in relation to their choices in higher education (table 8.2).

**Table 8.2: Information Used to Choose University: Questionnaire Sample**

| Information Used        | Yes<br>(no.) | No<br>(no.) | No answer<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Open Day                | 84           | 95          | 15                 | 194            |
| Prospectus              | 64           | 34          | 98                 | 194            |
| Personal Recommendation | 45           | 51          | 98                 | 194            |

43.3% (n=84) of the students had attended an open day at the university. Only 32.9% (n=64) of the students used the university prospectus to find out about the university and the courses offered, and 23.2% (n=45) relied on personal recommendation(s). These findings highlight the degree to which the students from the questionnaire sample relied more so on their own judgement of the university through attending an



open day (n=84) compared to trusting a personal recommendation (n=45). Only 64 students used the 'traditional' source of information, i.e. the university prospectus. Information obtained from the focus group interviews, however, showed that the majority of the sample used some form of written information alongside other forms such as open days and personal recommendation to decide whether to study at the university.

"I looked in the prospectus from school...but it was also recommended as well to me, not necessarily the teaching course but the university as a whole... My friends. Somebody who came the year before" (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"UCAS...I think the open day as well was an eye opener and you decided right away whether you liked the feel of it here" (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"I used this big thick book I think it was done by a bank or something don't know what it was called but it was given out to us so I used that as well...it was from a student's point of view...It was more like stuff you want to know like how far away things were and whether the bus service was good and just usual things which you'd been wondering about as well. And then you could use a prospectus for the college side of it" (Respondent 1, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"For myself, because I'm a foreign student from \*\*\*\*\* we have a British consul there and they came every year to advertise all the universities in this country, so I went there and then they gave me some information" (Respondent 2, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

"I took advice from lecturers at college and they suggested two or three universities that had some sort of links with the college I went to which seemed quite good" (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

Only one student felt that before making their choice they had researched the university fully, and stated that this was due to the Access course they had attended prior to entry to university.

"That was quite good about the Access as well because they are very geared to getting you into university. I mean the actual assignment was researching universities...plus going to Access as well you tend to go to university with people you know" (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

Only one student used no information at all, and chose the university purely on the basis of location.

"I just came here because it was the nearest one to me" (Respondent 3, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The access route interviews highlighted that very few of the students visited the university and relied mainly on information from the prospectus and the UCAS handbook. Students stated,

“I used the prospectus, that was the main piece of information” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I went to the advice shop first in Wolverhampton because I’ve known for quite a few years I wanted to go into further study...they were really, really helpful, really nice” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“The UCAS form of which universities offered which things but apart from that I didn’t really know about it” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I used the UCCAS handbook...the prospectus I sent off for. That was it I think” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Though the majority of the students had used some type of information to make their choice of university, less than half of the questionnaire sample (84 of 194) had visited the university and seen the campus and the immediate area. Just over a third of the students (64 of 194) used a university prospectus to examine the type and content of their course. Information too was used to choose which university to study at, though the amount and depth of the information used varied between students.

### 8.3 Information Used to Choose Course

The focus groups sample was asked which type of information they used to choose their course of study and the data obtained clearly showed that decisions were being made on very little information. The following quotes are examples of lack of information used from the students who were studying the B.Ed Secondary Education course.

“None. None at all. I applied about two weeks before as well. Saw an ad in the paper and was thinking about what I was going to do because I’d just had the second child, thinking what am I going to do when they’re a bit older. Was thinking about it, saw an ad and thought oh well follow up on that and low and behold I was on the course two weeks later” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I didn’t use much. I joined, I think I applied about two weeks before the course started and it was a question of I’d looked up one or two universities having decided I wanted to go into teaching but because of such a short time period involved I didn’t really have any other information” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“I didn’t know the two year shortened course existed until I applied. I didn’t know it was in existence at all” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Other students within the sample used one or more of the available information systems such as the University shop, careers advice, personal recommendation or the university’s prospectus.



**“I went into the shop in Wolverhampton, the university shop, and found some information from there and then someone I knew at college sort of put me in touch with the course” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).**

**“I’d applied here and then decided to take a year out so really I’d got all the information on the course, I just reapplied. It was just through prospectuses and careers information at school, things like that really” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).**

**“I used the careers adviser at school and used one of the books that says all the entry requirements and we had a choice of about six or seven and sent off for the prospectus and did it that way. Just looked at the content of the courses” (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).**

**“Well the only information I got was from the prospectus, and it was okay but I think it could have gone a bit more in depth...I think the information is fine, because I mean the education shop is there and if you want you know the, the facility is there if you want to go and find out you can go in and book an appointment and speak to somebody and they are quite willing to discuss it with you” (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).**

The data obtained through the access route interviews reinforced the findings of the focus group interviews, that the students’ chose their course with the use of very little information. Students commented,

**“Prospectus mainly. Had a look in that. I think that was it, I didn’t actually go to an open day here, I just applied” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).**

**“Just the prospectus really and just the fact that I think when you’re choosing, if you’ve already decided you definitely want to be a teacher, there’s nothing really to look into, it is the only course to do so you’ve got to do it” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).**

**“I’ve always wanted to be a teacher and I’ve always been interested in PE and done PE so basically I knew I wanted to be a primary school teacher and wanted to carry on with my PE” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).**

**“I came to one open day, I didn’t particularly find it useful or not useful...I looked at the prospectus which...was a bit confusing...I was actually pulling my hair out...A couple of friends were coming as well...I didn’t want to be thrown in at the deep end. My first time at university, mature student” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).**

**“It was the best prospectus in terms of information as to the courses and how you could combine them and that kind of thing. I sort of went through all of the local one’s like I was going through holiday brochures” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).**

**“The prospectus, all the information in there” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).**

**“I went to a careers office and I did have a glance but it was a glance again just to see what the course entailed basically...I’d been to university before so I knew that like they have a student union and they’ve got a library. I just wanted to get on the course...I wanted to get my teaching degree basically and I would like to be a teacher” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).**

**“I wanted to be a teacher and obviously to be a teacher you’ve got to do a course so I had to choose a course that did teaching” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).**

Most of the students in the focus group and access route interviews were studying to become teachers and this seemed to influence their choice of course. The students felt that their choice of course was limited as to teach involved studying a teacher training degree course. The students, therefore, looked into the course content through using information such as the university prospectus. The career orientation of the students resulted in them not having to 'choose' their course, but rather read around the course content and to examine which subjects they would have to choose to become qualified in teaching.

#### 8.4 Summary

Through examining the reasons why the students chose the university and their course of study, factors such as university location, residence whilst studying, and information provision were found to be significant on the students' experiences of higher education.

The majority of the students were found to be studying at their local university, highlighting that the students' choices of university were influenced by a regional, rather than a national, focus. Over half of the students' wanted to remain at home whilst studying, either at their parents home or their own home, and therefore, choice of university and remaining at home whilst studying were significantly associated. Other factors such as a lack of financial capital, social capital highlighted through family responsibilities, and a focus on educational ambition, all influenced many students' decisions to remain at home whilst studying.

The degrees to which the students relied on information to choose the university and their course of study varied. The students' choices of which course to study were minimal due to the majority of the students wanting to teach and thus having to study a teaching qualification. The students used information rather as a process of confirming their choice of course for their career aims rather than making a 'choice' from a variety of courses within a number of disciplines.

The following chapter (Chapter 9) moves further into the theoretical model of the study, and discusses the students' academic experiences whilst in higher education.

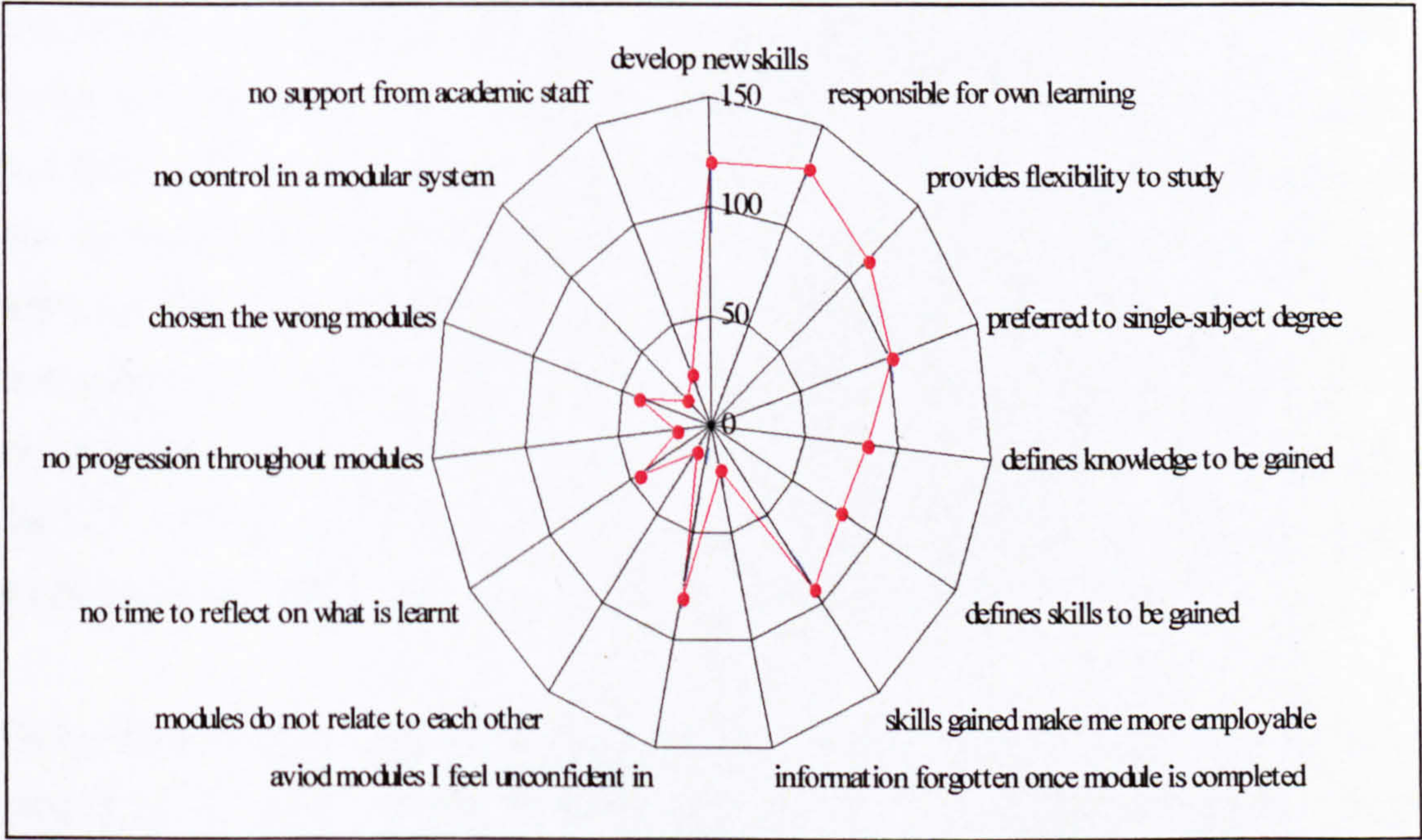


## Chapter 9: Academic Experiences of Higher Education

### 9.1 Learning Experiences and Modularisation

The questionnaire sample was asked a series of questions in relation to their experiences of a modular programme of study, the development of skills, and the use of assessments within higher education. Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. The following data represents the statements to which all the students agreed in relation to modularity (chart 9.1).

**Chart 9.1: Factors Relating to a Modular Course: Questionnaire Sample**



It can be seen on chart 9.1 that the sample agreed with the positive aspects of a modular course represented on the right hand side, e.g. responsible for own learning, at a higher rate than the negative aspects represented on the left hand side, e.g. choosing the wrong modules. The most significant finding was that 66.5% (n=129) of the students agreed that modularity enabled them to be responsible for their own learning. 62.4% (n=121) of the students agreed that modularity enabled them to develop new skills, and 58.2% (n=113) agreed that modular courses provide a more flexible approach to learning. 52.1% (n=101) of the students saw modular courses as more appropriate than single-subject degrees, and 50.5% (n=98) said a modular course allowed them to manage their time and workload better. Students agreed that the modular programmes defined the knowledge to be gained (42.8% - 83) and the



skills to be gained (40.7% - 79), whilst 47.4% (n=92) of the students agreed that a modular course enabled them to become a more 'employable' graduate. 54.1% (n=105) of the students agreed that they were able to manage their own workload and time on a modular course. All of these points represent perceived advantages of studying on a modular course.

21.1% (n=41) of the students, however, stated that they had chosen the wrong module(s). 41.2% (n=80) felt that they could avoid modules in which they felt unconfident. 9.3% (n=18) of the students stated that they felt they had little or no control on a modular course with 7.2% (n=14) stating that the modules they have chosen did not relate to each other. 10.3% (n=20) of the students agreed that they forget information once a module is completed, and 23.2% (n=45) stated that they had little time to reflect upon what they had learnt once each module was completed due to having to move onto another module throughout the academic programme. 9.8% (n=19) of the students agreed that modules did not progress from beginning to end and 13.4% (n=13) felt they had no support from the academic staff, with 30.4% (n=59) agreeing that teaching lacks one-to-one contact. Class sizes were both too big for 16.5% (n=32) and too small for 5.6% (n=10) of the students. 14.4% (n=28) of the students felt isolated at the university, as it is a large institution.

Overall, the sample perceived both positive and negative consequences on a modular programme of study, though students agreed more with positive statements. The students stated that modular courses enable them to: develop new skills; be responsible for their own learning; have flexibility to study; become a more 'employable' graduate; manage their time and workload. Few students felt that they had no control or that modules did not relate to each other. These findings highlight lots of opportunities for colonisation strategies, with only a small number emphasising 'coping' demands. The quantitative data, therefore, supports the argument that modularity provides students with more flexibility and choice within their studies (MacWhannell, 1994).

The qualitative data obtained from the focus group interviews and the individual interviews examined how the students felt about their choices of modules and whether, when choosing their modules, they experienced an adequate degree of



'choice'. The focus group students felt that they chose their modules with little information in relation to the content of the modules. Many of the students did not feel that module summaries were sufficient enough in providing details about the course content, structure, and methods of assessment. Students felt that they needed information about module content to determine whether they felt capable and interested in the subject and were making the right choice. One student commented that they needed something that,

"tells you what your assessments are as well so you can go for something that it sounds like you can cope with" (Respondent 5, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The issue of modules 'clashing' resulted in the students having to decide which module to choose over another module. This was an issue for many of the students and was reflected in the comments put forward by the focus group sample.

"That was weird because we didn't know what they were about or what to, you were just given a piece of paper basically...And they seemed to clash a lot didn't they" (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"Yes. It was actually trying to fit it all in wasn't it" (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The 'clashing' of modules is an example of 'barriers' that some students have to overcome. Students may have to adopt coping strategies and become colonisers of the system, that being, change direction due to barriers imposed though follow a new path that will fulfil their goals as closely as possible.

Students from the focus groups put forward many reasons as to why they chose their modules and on what basis they made their decisions. The majority of students stated that they had chosen modules based on the assumption of what they expected to do well in academically. Such examples are provided below.

"I think we probably took what we thought we'd be good at rather than what was useful. We should really have had a range of everything, from accounts to computers" (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"Our first year was compulsory wasn't it? It was compulsory modules so I chose mine on what I'd done reasonably well on in the first year, I chose those then in the second what I thought I could do alright in" (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Another significant influence on students' module choices was the university site on which the module was being taught and how convenient the site was for them in



terms of travel. Other students chose modules by which lecturer they preferred to be taught by. An example of each of these findings are shown below.

“I’ve been on three sites for one. Wolverhampton for one module, Dudley for another, and here. Goodness me...you have to choose modules because of the travelling and time” (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

“I picked a lot of my subjects at Dudley by people I liked and didn’t like. And I know that’s probably the wrong way to do it but if you’re going to have a clash with someone there’s no point doing it” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Limited choice was an issue for some of the students who felt that they had to choose modules (coping strategy) they didn’t want to choose due to the limited range of modules offered as part of their course.

“There’s not such a wide range of choice for TESOL or education for instance, you have to choose other modules that you don’t particularly want to do” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

“I really enjoyed my TESOL and I personally would have got more out of it if I’d have done more on it...There’s so much more I wanted to know” (Respondent 4, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

“In some respects they’ve been forced upon you because there’s such a limited range of courses, of modules that you can take” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

“Most of them I think were told that I had to take them...I don’t think we did have a lot of choice, in the first year we definitely didn’t. In the second year I think we had a few...in our third year we had quite a bit of choice but then when you’re doing Education most of it is dictated” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, female, <20 yrs).

“I think that they ought to think more about giving the B.Eds more of a choice because you don’t have a choice really” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“We had no choice on the modules...The only modules which I could choose was my History module which is my subsidiary subject which I found was a waste of time...the PE module...covered all aspects so I don’t think you really needed a choice for it” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The focus groups and the individual interviews brought to light that in some cases students considered module choices were to varying degree restricted by internal or external factors. Students chose modules to coincide with external commitments such as employment and dependents, so that lectures could be attended alongside meeting other commitments.

“It was sort of what you could fit in on your timetable wasn’t it. Like you want to work Mondays so you thought well I won’t do that. What you could fit in. It’s a bit adhoc isn’t it really” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).



"I started off with all good intentions in the first year with those that sounded more interesting and the time factor...If it was a morning lecture I could be back in the evening to pick my son up from school. Or I'd try and get as many lectures into the one day...so I'd sit there for ages with modules guides and mixing and matching, pulling my hair out thinking this should be simple but it wasn't...In theory you're supposed to have choice in modules to be able to say oh I'd like to do that, or I'll do that. You're supposed to have so many choices that you're okay but you don't" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The above quotes highlight how a lack of financial capital and a lack of alternative child care arrangements (relational-social capital) impinge on students choices, with students having to choose modules that coincide with working part-time to subsidise their financial commitments and caring for children. These quotes are examples of how competing priorities resulted in the student having to choose modules that coincided with other commitments.

There were a number of influential factors on students choices of modules, such as whether the module involved an exam or an assignment, whether university friends were choosing the same module, and which tutor was teaching the module.

"We didn't want the late evening one's, well especially when it was winter time and there was just us girls walking back through...So I think friends did influence me quite a lot on what I was going to do but all the modules I have done I've more or less enjoyed all of them anyway so it hasn't been a problem" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"The first semester I think there were some one's that you'd got to do and then the others you just chose by reading what sounded nice...I did look if it was an assignment, at the content of the assignment ...I've chosen a lot of mine by what teacher was teaching them. If it was a teacher I didn't get on with I didn't do it. And it's probably not the right way of doing it but I feel at the end of the day if you end up with somebody that you're not going to get on with and you're not going to be able to ask then perhaps it is a good way of doing it" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"The first few I think were set out for you and the second year we had a choice and I just chose the easiest ones...I prefer an exam instead because I've had the experience...I remember some of them did clash so that restricted me...not to a great extent" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"The last two years I chose modules, this year they're all stated for me. And when you say choose it's not choose...they said okay we've stated what your first year is, you've got a tiny bit a choice in the second year and your third years basically PGCE...I don't think it's anybody's fault it's just the way it's gone" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"Well I mean the first year of course was the core ones...The TESOL one's I haven't had much choice really because there's a minimum I have to do and I haven't had enough modules to do more than the minimum so that's been quite simple. And the linguistics ones have been the hardest to choose because I've wanted to do all of them and I haven't been able to so. I don't think I've ever chosen modules because I knew I'd get a good mark in them" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



Pre-requisites needed to choose certain modules were seen as a constraint on students' choices and had restricted some students from studying modules they would have liked to do. Students' commented,

"You're restricted again there because you've got to have pre-requisites, co-requisites and haven't done those so I can keep being told the rhetoric doesn't match the reality... You'd expect... to have a variety of choices, you don't. Not at all. It could be worse I could just be told that that's the time, Tuesday evening you come or else, so it could be a lot worse" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"To be honest a lot of it we didn't have choice with, they'd say as a training teacher you should take this module and then obviously there's the constraints that you have to have taken one's before... the chances were we hadn't taken the modules you had to have taken which sort of leaves you just going in the same vein" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

One student highlighted that unexpected events occurred that placed constraints on choice and resulted in a change of direction.

"All sorts of things have happened, modules have been cancelled at the last minute... they're suddenly not available when you planned that they would be which is a shame... They expect you to plan a timetable at the beginning of the second year for the following two years and half way through that time they have a revalidation and everything disappears and gets turned into something different... So you find yourself spending much more time planning than you do on your modules" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs)

Educational choices were limited by a number of factors, such as changes in provision and a predetermined course structure, the need for pre-requisites to begin certain modules, students' preferences of assessments or exams, and the responsibility of having dependent children and/or employment commitments. Though students felt that they were not provided with a wide degree of choice initially, they also faced their own constraints on choice due to their own personal and social positions.

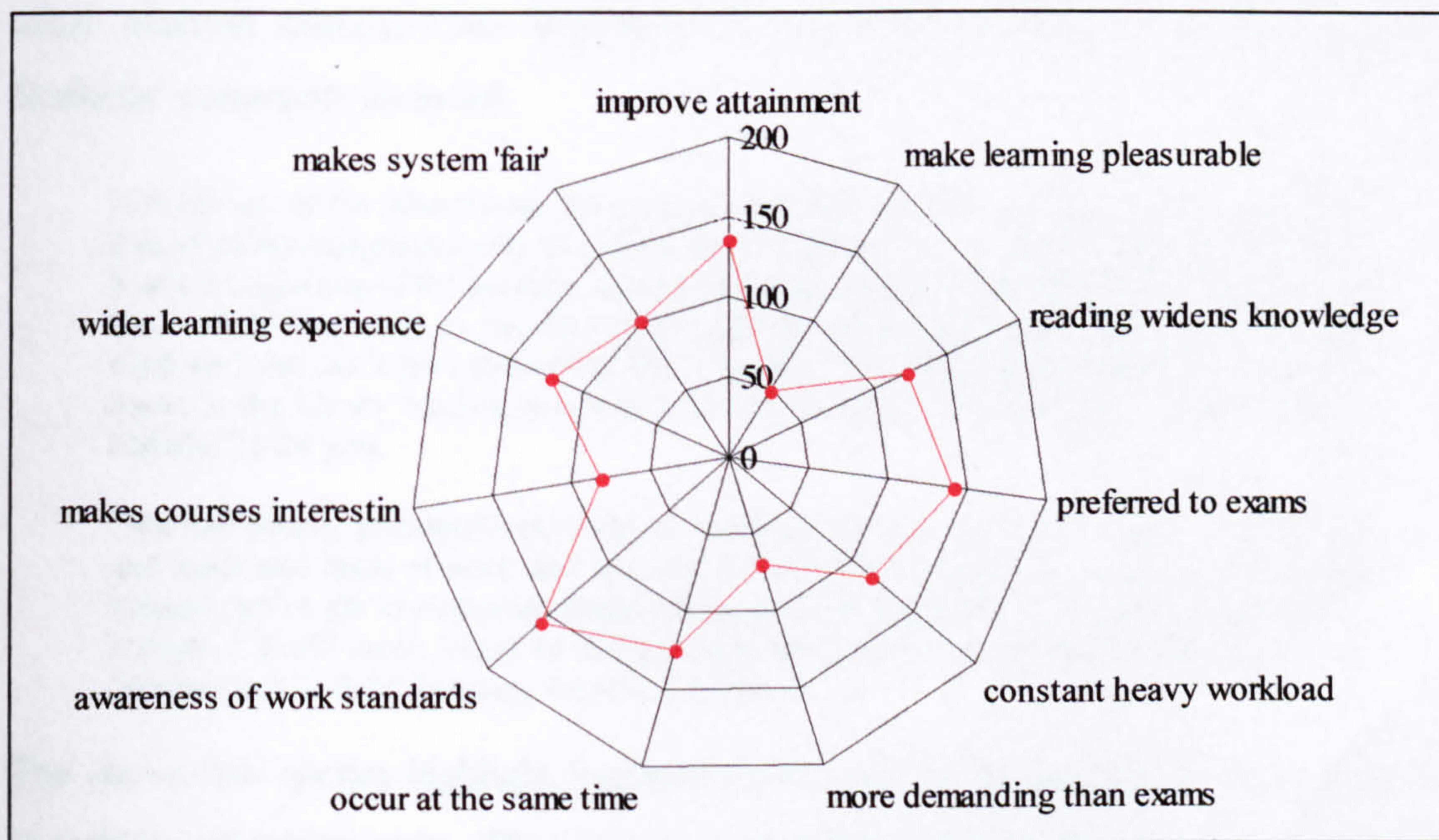
## 9.2 Course Assessments

In relation to the use of assessments as a learning experience in higher education, the questionnaire sample was asked to respond to a number of positive and a number of negative statements. The following data relates to the degree to which students agreed with the statements provided. The comparative results can be seen on chart 9.2.



70.1% (n=136) of the students agreed that assessments improved attainment and monitored progress. 62.9% (n=122) agreed that assessments provided a wider learning experience. Assessments were seen as a way of making the course more interesting by 41.8% (n=81) of the students, and learning more pleasurable by 25.3% (n=49) of the students. 63.4% (n=123) of the students agreed that the wide reading required through assessment work widens knowledge, with 73.2% (n=142) of the students preferring assessments throughout their course to end of year examinations. 52.6% (n=102) of the students saw assessments as making the system 'fair', and 80.4% (n=156) students agreed that assessments provided them with a continual awareness of their standard of work.

**Chart 9.2: Factors Relating to Course Assessment: Questionnaire Sample**



59.8% (n=116) of the students, however, stated that assessments produce a constant and heavy workload during their studies, with 35.6% (n=69) stating that continual assessments are more demanding than examinations. 63.9% (n=124) of the students agreed that assessments for each module occurred at the same time, thus producing heavy workloads at certain times of the academic year.

The students' attitudes to assessments were balanced with students recognising both the positive and negative consequences of the use of assessments. Though the majority of students regarded assessments as a means of improving attainment



(n=136) and widening knowledge (n=123), the majority also saw assessments as producing a constant and heavy workload (n=116), as assessments often had the same completion dates. The majority of students recognised the negative factors associated with assessment procedures, but still preferred continual assessment compared to end of year examinations (n=142).

The realities of 'bunching' of assignment completion dates came out strongly too in the focus group interviews. Students felt that modules provided work with no consideration of other workloads from other modules. Assignments were often expected by tutors to be completed and handed in around or on the same date leaving the students with many assignments to complete during a particular time of the semester. The students were aware of the issue of time management, but felt that other external commitments impinged on the time available to them to study. Students' comments included,

"I think one of the other things is that if you're doing say four or five modules you'll find that all of the assignments are due in the same week and it's not the fact that you can start it at the beginning of the module because the most relevant module for the assignment is the week before. And so you find we've got five or six assignments due in on the last week and you can't start them until like a week or two weeks before and then there's no books in the library because everyone else has got them" (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"We had essays, presentations, visits to write up, journals to keep. I mean it was loads and loads and loads of work and some of the courses just have two assignments. That's because we're all assessments based because we don't have any exams, which is fair enough. I'd still much rather be doing twenty assignments rather than doing one exam" (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The above two quotes highlight legitimate concerns by the students in relation to the 'bunching' of assignments. These quotes exemplify too how the students rely greatly on the direction of the lecture before beginning an assignment. The notion of 'independence' of learning, despite being a previously a positive expectation, does not seem to be in play, with the result that the students externalise blame onto the course timetable and the lack of library resources.

One of the main issues discussed in the focus group interviews was the issue of available time to complete academic work. Students commented not only on the available time in relation to academic work, but also in relation to the time available for other external commitments, such as family and part-time employment.



“A lot of juggling. Sort of getting the dates and working backwards, that’s how I’ve done it. Planning well which one have I got to do first” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“You’ve just got to manage your time haven’t you” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I mean my assignments I know I could have done better if I’d have had the time. It’s thinking I’ve got to get it done for this date” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I think if you can get through your teaching practice effectively...you can manage most workloads but it doesn’t mean I’m disputing that the amount of work we’ve got now is ridiculous” (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I think we all feel this year especially, especially for TESOL...has been just too much” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

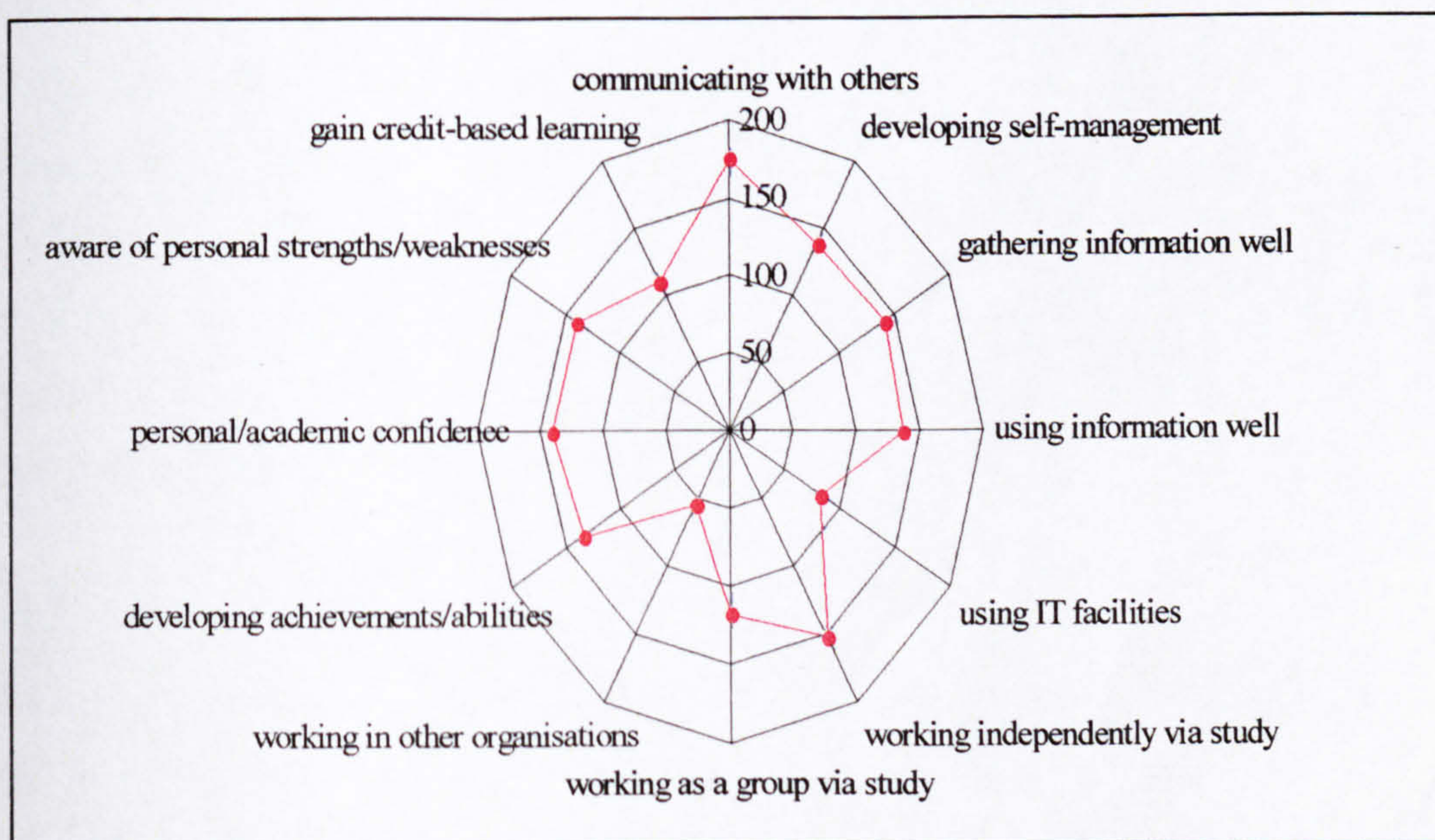
“The assignments we’ve had to do has just been far too much” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

Many students felt that the course workload was too heavy and that time was valuable to them, and that they had to manage their time effectively to ensure that work was completed and other commitments were not neglected.

### 9.3 Development of Skills

The questionnaire sample was asked which skills they considered they were developing whilst studying in higher education. The following data represents the statements the students agreed with (chart 9.3).

**Chart 9.3: Factors Relating to Skills Development: Questionnaire Sample**





The questionnaire sample identified that they were developing skills in the areas of; communication 90.7% (n=176); developing self-management 71.6% (n=139); gathering information well 96.6% (n=141); using information well 70.1% (n=136); working independently via study 78.4% (n=152); working as part of a group via study 60.3% (n=117); gaining credit -based learning 57.2% (n=111). The majority of students' agreed they were developing; achievements and abilities 69% (n=134); personal and academic confidence 72.7% (n=141); awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses 72.2% (n=140). These findings are interesting when compared to the views of the students in relation to the clashing of modules, and course timetables that result in assignments often being bunched together. The impression of work being rushed, unplanned, and undertaken within many constraints, lie alongside the findings that show the students to be developing the skills mentioned above.

In other areas of skills development, however, the majority of students did not consider that they were gaining these skills. Only 42.3% (n=82) of the students thought they were gaining IT skills, with only 27.8% (n=54) gaining experience in other organisations outside of the university. Only 23.7% (n=46) and 24.2% (n=47) of the students felt they were gaining skills through voluntary work either independently respectively.

The data shows that the majority of the students believed that they were developing skills such as; communicating with others; developing personal and academic confidence; working independently either alone or with other students in group work; developing self-management; and gaining credit-based learning. Only 42.3% (n=82) of the students said they were developing skills in information technology. 29.3% (n=24) of those 82 students, however, were on the BA (Hons) Secondary course. This was the only course that had more than half of the students confirming that they were developing these I.T skills.

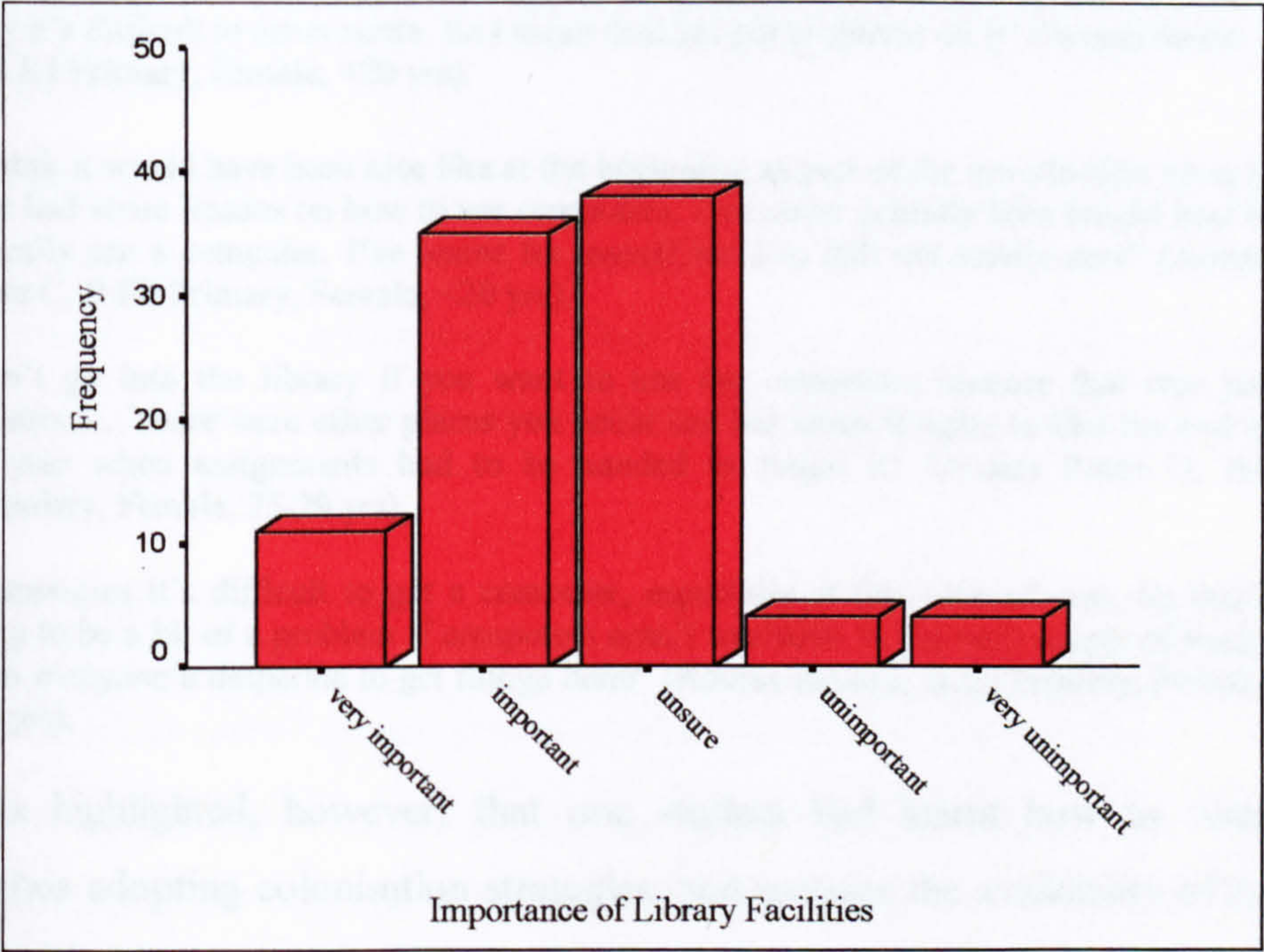
#### **9.4 Library and I.T Facilities**

The questionnaire survey sample was asked how important the library facilities were when choosing to study at the university. The data is shown on chart 9.4. Though only 47.4% (n=92) of the students provided an answer, it was made evident that the library and IT facilities were not a significant area of concern for students when



choosing whether to study at the university. This could also be the reason that just over half of the students did not provide an answer. Only 5.7% (n=11) of the students felt that the library was very important compared to 18% (n=35) who felt that it was very important. 19.6% (n=38) were unsure of their opinion. Only 4.2% (n=8) of the students considered the library to be an unimportant area of consideration when choosing to study at the university.

**Chart 9.4: Importance of Library Facilities**



The students who participated in the individual interviews were asked about their experiences of the library facilities at the university, and how these had enhanced or restricted their studies. Students who had found the library to be helpful commented,

“The library’s not bad...I think the borrower services are actually very good on the computer, the way you can go up and you have your own pin number and you can renew stuff directly over there. And especially like the over the phone renewals as well, that’s a good system. But the computers not very reliable...But overall I think it is good, obviously you can get books transferred from campus to campus and that’s useful...But the main thing at the moment, especially for me while I’ve got so much work on is the opening hours. So many universities I hear of have twenty-four hour facilities...have one of the computer rooms open and that’s it” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I’ve never had a problem with the library because I’ve worked the system. I think if you can’t work the computers and you can’t reserve books you’d never have them because they’re never on the shelf. I haven’t really used the IT that much because I’ve got a computer at home” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



“The IT facilities are excellent I would say, really good. And the library I’d say it’s good” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I love the reservation service as well and inter-site library because some of the books I’ve had to get from Dudley and from here and a lot at Wolverhampton and oh no trouble at all...I couldn’t complain about any of it” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Students had experienced difficulties and restrictions imposed on their learning due to a lack of facilities such as computers.

“They need more computer rooms...But when you actually want to go down there and do some work, you know, you can’t find a computer that’s free and because it’s so noisy it’s difficult to concentrate. So I mean that has put problems on it” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I think it would have been nice like at the beginning as part of the introduction week to have had some lessons on how to use computers. I’ve never actually been taught how to basically use a computer. I’ve learnt for myself but I’m still not totally sure” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Don’t go into the library if you want to use the computers because that was just disastrous...There were other places you could use but when it came to like the end of the year when assignments had to be handed in forget it” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“Sometimes it’s difficult to get a computer, especially at this time of year. So that’s going to be a bit of a problem if computers aren’t available in the next couple of weeks when everyone’s desperate to get things done” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Comments highlighted, however, that one student had learnt how to ‘work the system’, thus adopting colonisation strategies, and manage the availability of facilities to her own advantage.

“When everyone’s dissertations due in you can’t find a computer, again it’s a question of being canny, if you’re down here at eight thirty there’s no-one on the computers so you learn to sort of work around it...the main problem here is that you can’t get twenty-four hour access to any computer. That’s something we’ve been asking about for ages...it’s a constraint which they should sort out but then you learn to work around it so it just depends how adaptable you are really” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The students’ commented on the library resources, though seemed to understand to a certain degree, however, why facilities were limited at particular times of the academic year, with some students highlighting how to ‘work the system’. Students commented,

“And then the library more books, I know that’s finance but it seems everyone needs books all at once and there’s a limited amount and so I think more books but obviously there’s reasons why there aren’t” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



"The library itself it's changed a lot over the last few years perhaps its a bit more user friendly. But it's the usual I think queuing up for photocopiers and you can't find the book when you want to get it and you've got thirty, forty students who want the same book and there's one, maybe two copies if you're lucky" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"It's quite frustrating sometimes with books, to find books that you need which are very, very teacher orientated stuck at main site. And obviously they could do with a lot more books, when you've got a class of twenty and there's only one copy and it's a set text and it costs twenty-five quid it does make a lot more sense to have it in the library than to expect people to buy it..." (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"With the library there are never enough books because the things that go on reading lists are just gone in a second...I don't know how they could get around that because obviously there's so many people on the course that you can't have enough books in the library for everyone so I don't really know what they could do" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The same students who had learnt how to adopt colonisation strategies or 'work the system' to be able to use the computers also 'worked the system' in relation to obtaining books. This student was a clear example of how students cope with limitations and become colonisers within their environment. In relation to obtaining books the students commented,

"I tend to get it very, very quick, out the lecture, straight in the library, my name down on everything and then people tend to know that I've got the books and they come and borrow them off me and then I get them back. I know it sounds awful but that's is the way to work the system" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Some of the students (n=3) had not used the library facilities as they either had their own computer at home or found the library too noisy.

"Haven't used the IT facilities to be honest because I have my own at home" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"Haven't really used the IT facilities, I try to avoid it, it's just too noisy and I can't concentrate, I do it at home...I've got my own and my partner's got two because he's a software programmer, writer so I've got access to lots of them, my own and my own computer support" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I've got a computer at home...definitely a big difference because I've got the internet at home as well now...So it's definitely helped me...All my work is neater. It's helped me with my workload as well in terms of rather than writing everything out I can have a template of a lesson plan and just carry on with that...I'd recommend anybody get a computer before they start their final year" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs)

The students seemed to have a mixture of both negative and positive experiences of the library and IT facilities at the university. Though the students were aware of the shortage of books and computers, students were accommodating to these problems. Students stated that by having a computer at home to use at their will and in the



convenience of their own home they could work much better and at convenient times to their work schedule. Students were also aware of how to 'work the system' with regards to obtaining books and felt that they had managed as they had worked their way around any difficulties, thus becoming colonisers within their environments.

### 9.5 Teacher Training Practice

A total of 30.9% (n=60) of the students from the questionnaire sample had completed a teaching practice as part of their course. 60.3% (n=117) had not completed a teaching practice. 8.8% (n=17) of the students did not provide an answer. Though it may seem that a high number of students had not participated in a teaching practice it must be noted that the questionnaire sample consisted of both first and second year students who may not as yet have been required to undertake a teaching practice as part of their studies. Additionally, the majority of the students on the Combined Studies in Education course were not studying specifically to become teachers, and thus did not have teaching practice.

The experiences of students on teaching practice placements varied from successful to problematic. Some students, however, felt that they were gaining skills and gaining confidence in relation to teaching while on their teaching practices.

"I've become better, not perfect but I've become better. I feel more confident in what I'm doing so I suppose that will be good in schools because I can tell kids what they're doing wrong, give them lots of tips" (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

One student experienced problems in areas such as the school they were placed in and relationships with tutors. The student felt that they should have a closer collaboration with the staff members or organisers in relation to which school they are placed in and commented,

"The university is not vetting the schools out well enough before people are sent into them...It's not easy for them trying to fit everybody in but I still think they should be closer to know what's going on in the schools. Firstly make sure that the school itself is acceptable and also that the school co-ordinators is tuned in and knows what they're meant to be doing...if you do get a bad school, it's very hit and miss what you get, and then when you have got a bad school there's not a lot you can do about it. They don't support you" (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

The issue of 'bad schools' and schools not being vetted by the university to ensure adequate training and provision for the students during their placement was an issue for concern amongst the qualitative (focus groups and interviews) student sample.



The individual interviews highlighted that students' had both positive and negative experiences of teacher training placements in schools.

"The first one was awful and I can't believe I even stayed in the course...I complained about the school and they never used the school since...my final practice was absolutely fantastic, I came out with the highest achievement that I could, I got a merit rather than a pass...I was in this school twice as long as the other school, and I really excelled myself" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"My experiences have actually been bad because nearly every year I've been placed miles away and I've had to change it because they don't seem to understand where I live...there have been schools that have been closer to me and there's been people from miles away sent there, they don't seem to organise it...It's just one extra thing you don't need" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"Very different each time. It's a bit of a lucky dip really...I don't think the university really takes as much care as they could in giving you a school that's accessible, it's often quite a long way" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Some of the students' (n=4) from the access route interviews commented that their teaching practice experiences had given them a 'taste' of what being a teacher involves, and that this had increased their confidence levels. Students made comments such as,

"The most valuable experience I've learnt is in the classroom. I think more classroom based you can be the better because it gives you the best opportunity to learn" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"It was okay, it was good...Experience. You feel as if you can cope in the real world" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"They were challenging, they were difficult but I think I'm glad I've done them. It's really developed me as a person...I think all the standard problems that everybody gets of teaching practice like kids stressing you out, the workload...I think I did much better than I expected because when I started the course I wasn't confident, I couldn't stand up in front of people but after the teaching practice I mean I developed...I think it would improve anybody's confidence" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs)

"I think it's been good from the point of view that it does give you a sort of, a taste of what life's going to be like as a teacher which in itself is quite a difficult job, you know, the constraints just come with the territory" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

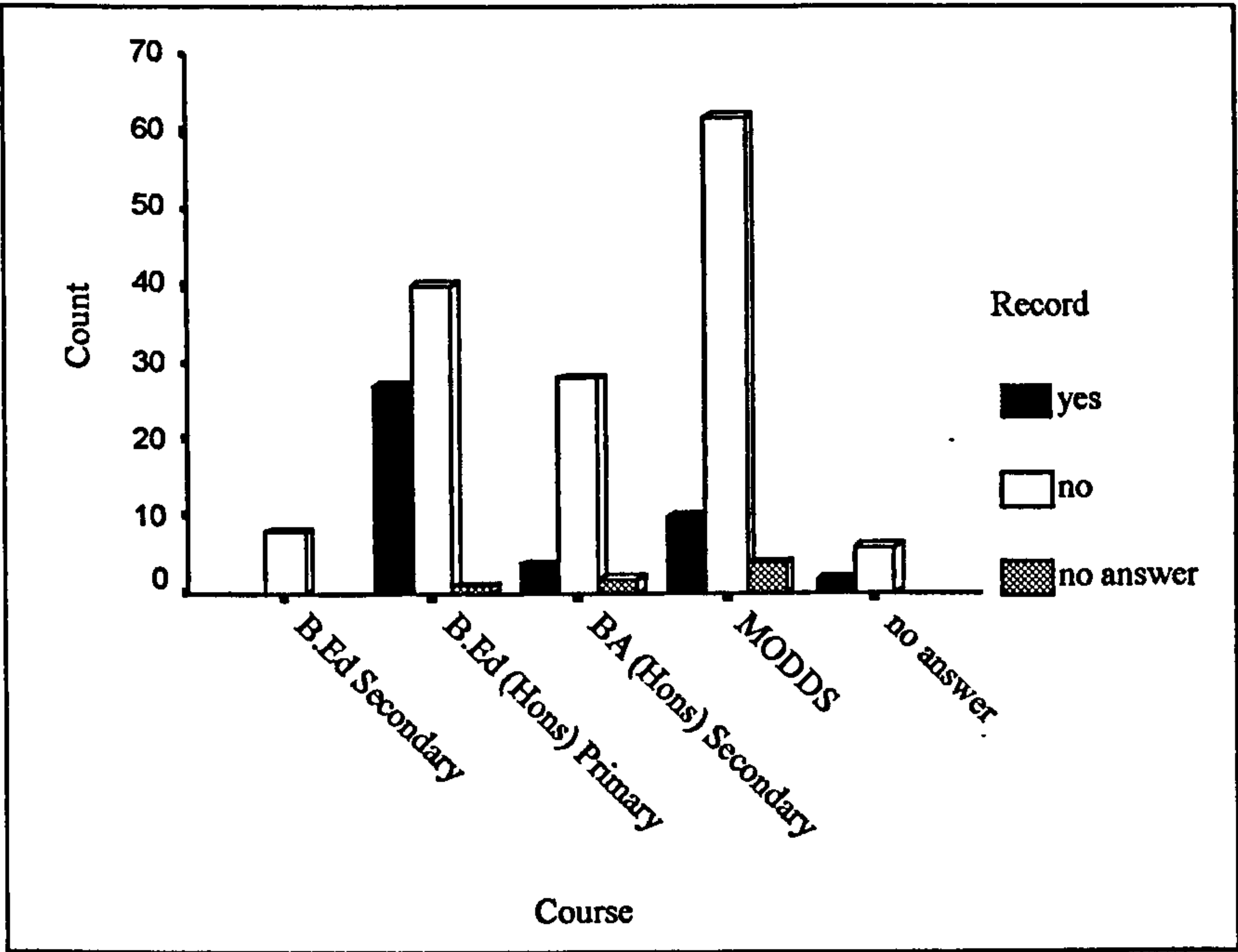
The students' felt that their teaching experiences were a mixture of positive and negative experiences, though this was not always determined by the school but also by issues such as travelling distance to teaching practices, and adapting to the role of the teacher in ways such as exercising discipline and gaining confidence. The comments highlighted that most of the students felt that they had benefited from their teaching practices and felt that it had provided them with a realistic view of teaching.



9.6 Records of Achievement

The questionnaire sample was asked whether they were keeping a record of achievement as part of their study programme. Only 22.2% (n=43) of the students kept a record of achievement although 61.9% (n=120) agreed that a record of achievement could be a helpful process. The majority (62.8% - 27) of the students keeping a record of achievement were studying the B.Ed Primary course and were aged 20 years or below on entry to the university. Data is shown on chart 9.5.

**Chart 9.5: Students Keeping a Record of Achievement by Course: Questionnaire Sample**



None of the students within the focus groups kept a record of achievement and were not sure of its purpose and expected outcomes. One student’s comment represents and highlights the overall views of the students who participated in the focus groups interviews.

“What is it? I wasn’t aware we had that available...I’d have certainly looked into it to find out what one looked like when it was produced. If I thought it would have been of value” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Students regarded a record of achievement as a method used in schools or colleges, and felt too ‘mature’ to consider keeping one at degree level. Students commented that a record of achievement was not needed as they maintain their curriculum vitae.

“I’ve got one from school” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).



“Yes I’ve got mine still from school. I keep it on from college but I haven’t done it for here” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“It seems very much like a younger persons type of thing to do, whereas we’re a bit more mature here, some of us more than others...we just put it on the C.V. or something which sounds a bit better that record of achievement. It just sounds a little bit woolly” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

Some of the students considered records of achievement to be a ‘waste of time’.

“I hadn’t heard of them until I got here. I just think they’re a waste of time” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

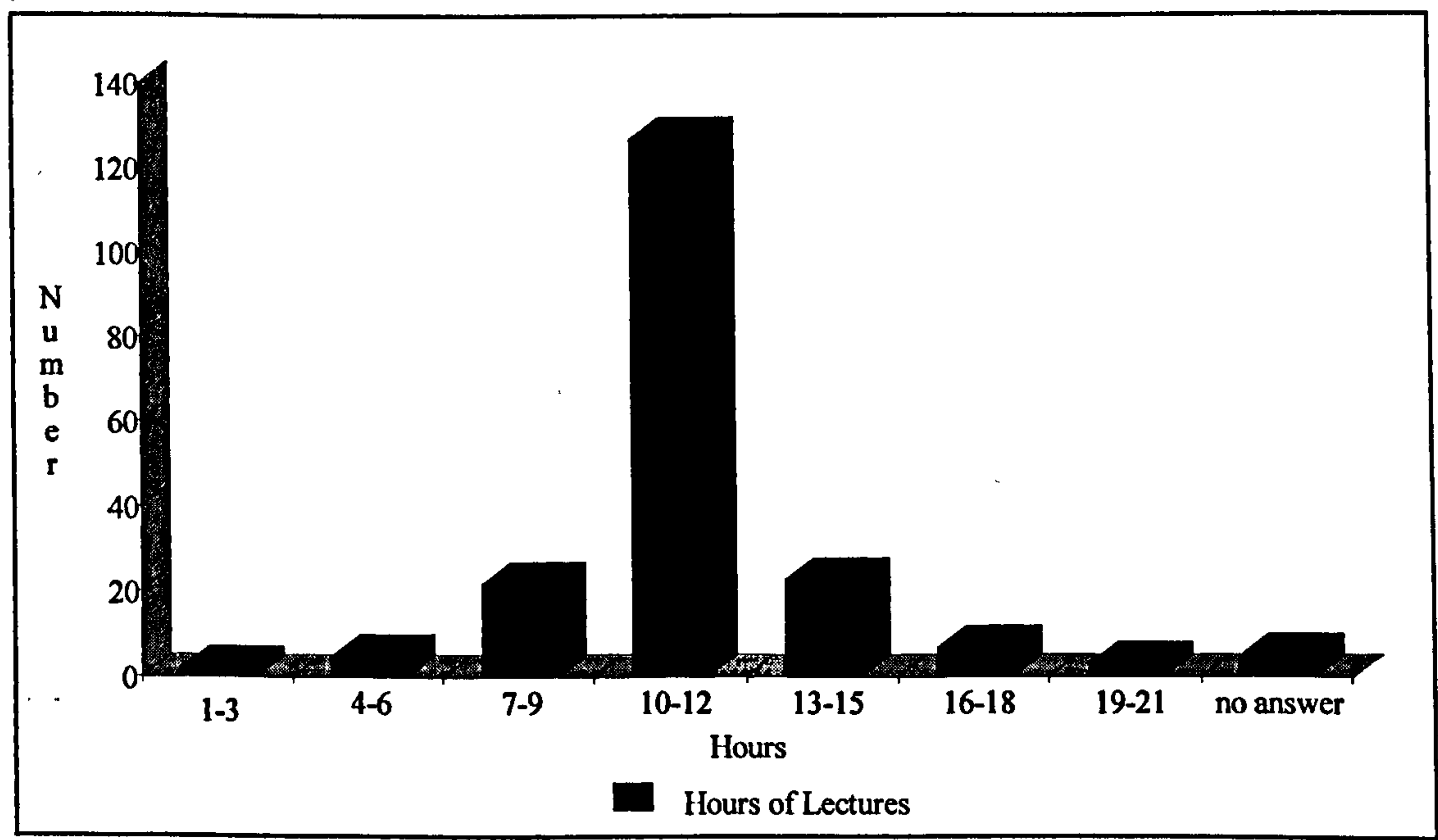
“I think they’re a waste of time because I mean your record is whatever certificate or whatever you’ve got and you just take that along to wherever you go...You can put that on a C.V. can’t you. It’s like it’s extra work” (Respondent 6, Combined Studies, Female, 40-44 yrs).

The students were unaware of the opportunity to keep a record of achievement. Overall students considered records of achievement to be time-consuming and of no real use to them or their chosen career path. It was also considered to be extra work, which, alongside academic and often non-academic commitments, they did not want.

9.7 Number of Hours Studying

The questionnaire sample was asked to specify how many hours of lectures they attended each week. The data is shown on chart 9.6.

**Chart 9.6: Number of Hours Students Attend Lectures:**  
**Questionnaire Sample**

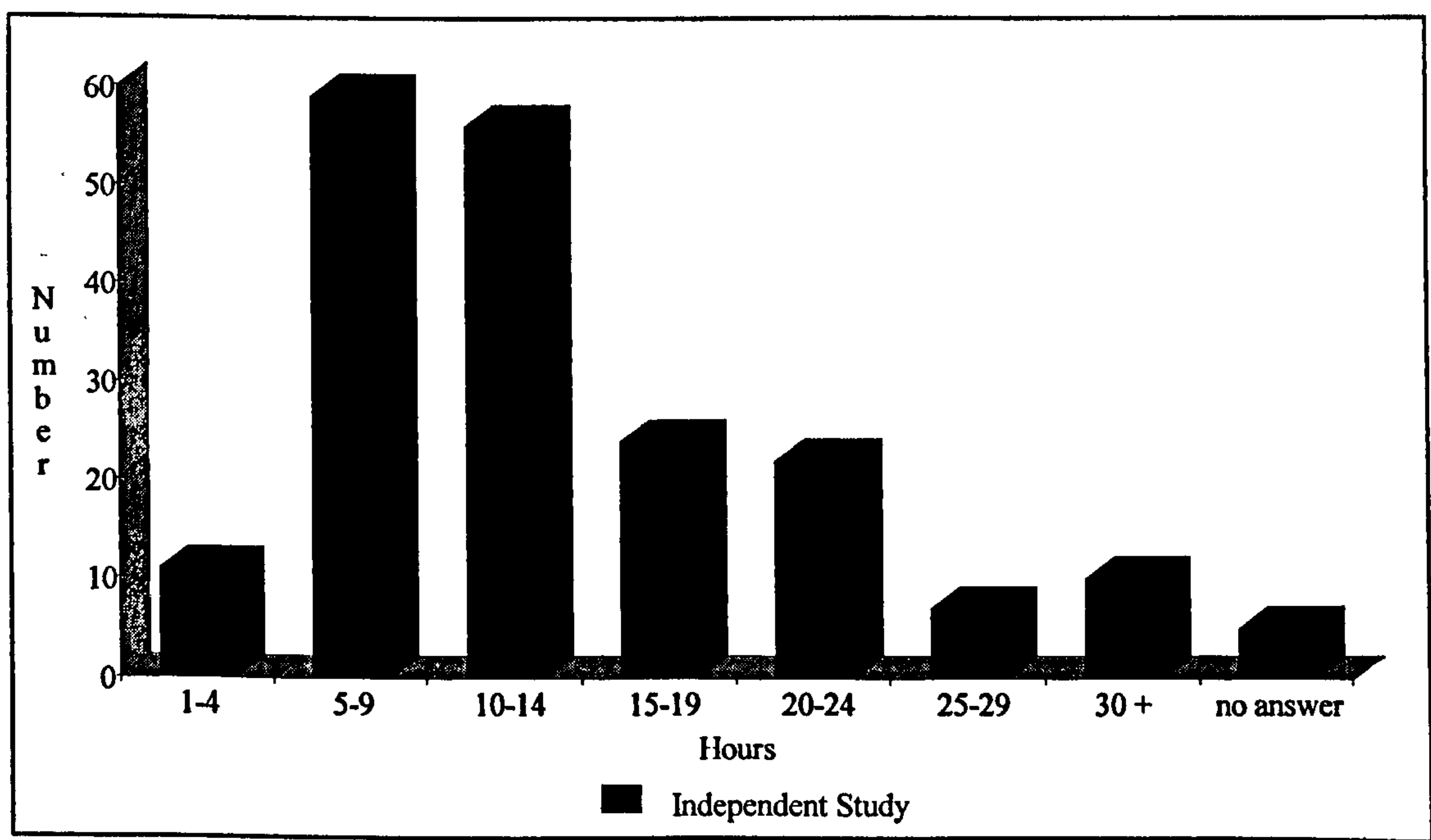




The majority of students attended between 10-12 hours of lectures per week. 65.5% (n=127) of the students attended between 10-12 hours per week, with 11.3% (n=22) attending between 7-9 hours and 11.9% (n=23) 13-15 hours per week. 3.6% (n=7) of the students attended between 16-18 hours per week of lectures with 2.6% (n=5) attending 4-6 hours and 1% (n=2) attending 1-3 hours per week. 2.6% (n=5) did not provide this information.

Students were asked to indicate the number of hours of independent study they undertake each week. Independent study refers to work conducted either alone or with others outside of taught lectures or seminars. 5.7% (n=11) of the students stated that they did between 1-4 hours of independent study each week compared to 30.4% (n=59) who undertook between 5-9 hours of independent study each week. 28.9% (n=56) of the students stated between 10-14 hours, and 12.4% (n=24) undertook between 15-19 hours of independent study each week. 11.3% (n=22) of the students undertook between 20-24 hours each week, and 3.6% (n=7) did between 25-29 hours of independent study each week. 5.2% (n=10) students studied 30 or more hours of independent study each week. 2.5% (n=5) of the students did not respond (chart 9.7).

**Chart 9.7: Number of Hours of Independent Study: Questionnaire Sample**





The variation in the number of hours that students' attended lectures, and the hours students studied independently, suggests that attendance levels, and particularly the additional hours of independent study, are the responsibility of the student. It will be interesting, however, to examine further the social constraints and opportunities to study for students, especially mature students with families or students with part-time jobs (Jones et al, 1997).

The individual interviews highlighted factors that the students considered impinged on their time to work, and also how students' managed their workload and time. Books were found to be a constraint on when students' were able to complete assignments due to limited availability of books at crucial times throughout the semester. One student commented,

"The books are one week loans and you've still got another ten weeks or so of the module. So by that time people have reserved them, you've got to keep renewing them, you want other books out, so that doesn't work. Of course you can't start your essay for the end of the module because normally the penultimate lecture is the one for your essay so then you get a constraint because you can't actually start it. So I'm always sort of leaving things to the last minute" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The students' who were 20 years old or below on entry to the university commented on how their available time was restricted by their social activities and life.

"My social life used to be a big problem, last year especially, because literally all my friends were on the same course as me...I just get distracted very easily" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Students' were aware of how they preferred to work, which involved either working steadily throughout the year or working at the last minute and under pressure. Students stated,

"I can't ever imagine myself doing sort of an essay with weeks and weeks to spare and going over it and over it and over it...I wouldn't be able to tell you if that would actually make any better than I'm actually producing at the moment" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I think I've only ever had one extension so I've never been that far behind that I've needed them. I've managed it quite well but I do like working under pressure...Although having three assignments on the go is not the ideal situation, I have found it better that I can swap if I'm bored...I've coped and I think that's what everybody would say, you have to do it. My constraints are just like self inflicted constraints by leaving everything until the last minute. I think you've got choices to make and I think you've got to decide what's best for you" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



“I feel I’m quite organised and I just look at it like it’s got to be done so you might as well just do it. I never leave it right until the last moment if possible because then I just panic...because of the problem of the library and the books I always try and get in there about three weeks before...I know everyone’s going to get the books so I can try and get them and photocopy the relevant bits beforehand” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I think it’s just a learning curve. I’ve just learned how to organise everything and organise my time...I’ve got a lot of responsibility at home which I have to juggle with my work...Sometimes I think I could have done a better piece of work if I had more time. But as a result most of the time I stay up late and get my work done. I’m alright if I don’t get any sleep” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“Sometimes it’s been quite difficult when we’ve had sort of assignments due shortly after teaching practice and all you can think about at the time is getting teaching over and done with and then you just want to relax and you’ve got loads of work...So I’ve organised it. Given myself deadlines although at the same time giving myself those deadlines has perhaps meant that my work isn’t of the standard it should be because I’ve not had all the lectures that I should have to go into the earlier essays. But you just have to prioritise don’t you” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Mature students with dependent children faced additional restrictions on their time when managing their workload, although they never considered this to be a ‘problem’. Students’ commented,

“The very beginning of a semester you’re really clued in and you really enjoy it and you get all your notes and you make your folders together, but I think when it comes closer to the deadline of your assignments it’s a mad haven of two and three o’ clock in the morning sometimes...With my son it was okay because he’d go to bed at a certain time and I’d study after that or I’d study during the times he was at school. But with my daughter it’s literally when she’s in the nursery or when she goes to sleep at night and at weekends...the constraints during the first year because you can never tell when they are going to wake up or not. Whereas now I can guarantee she’s going to sleep and that’s it. It’s a pattern so I’m alright” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Well I started off quite good really planning, a nice little timetable, when I was going to do everything but it never works. Life tends to get in the way. I mean I don’t know how all the younger students manage to have a social life as well. I had lots of...family problems last year and so I had to re-arrange it so that I slept in the day and worked through the night...Having to work has been the worst thing. My daughter hasn’t been a problem...she’s been to quite a few lectures actually” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“The fact I’ve got a fella and the fact I’ve got a son I think have been the major ones. He wants a mommy, my fella wants a partner so having to fit time to do that. And I’ve also got a close family so I’ve had to find time to be a daughter and a sister as well. And his mom so I’ve had to find time to be a daughter-in-law and to fit all the roles in. Not necessarily the work, you know everything else around it. A girl I was studying with was twenty-one, living at home, no responsibilities so she can study whenever she likes whereas I had to force myself, well make time to study” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I didn’t do the first year in the same way as all the eighteen year olds did...I think if I’d have come at eighteen and done all the partying I wouldn’t have got such good grades” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



Students' constraints on their time and workload were significantly associated with having dependent children. The mature students felt that they had to work when they could due to other roles in their lives they were fulfilling, such as being a partner or a mother. Though children were a significant constraint on time and work management to some of the mature students they did not consider this to be a problem, but instead commented on how they had to work around these constraints and manage their time more effectively, thus adopting, to varying degrees, effective coping and colonisation strategies. The students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university seemed to discuss a mixture of working patterns such as being consistent or working at the last minute and under pressure. They commented more on their social life having a significant impact on their time compared to the mature students who felt they had little, if any, social life.

Students' recognised the differences between the different years of study in relation to workload and course expectations. Students' also felt that as time passed, their need to complete the course became stronger.

"I mean there's been the obvious changes, workloads got more, and obviously it's at a higher level...So really there hasn't been much difference, it's been a gradual change" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"The first two years were a doddle and the final year was just total contrast...The final year was just work based, teaching practices. I think if I did a normal degree it would have just been a doddle but because of this I mean it's really difficult, it's really, really, difficult" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"The last two years you have four modules each semester and so you get into a routine...The next year is based on what you did last year and then all of a sudden you're doing a kind of PGCE course on your last year and all you know basically is that everybody's doing some teaching or a lot of teaching...it's a big contrast... I don't think they prepare you enough for it" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"There seemed to have been a huge difference between the first year and the second year but I can't quite work out why. ...It's so personal because at the end of three years you're just tired and bored and fed up and you want to go home. And I mean that's basically it. You're sick of studying, you're sick of living like a student and you're sick of handing in" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The quotes provided above show how the students recognised the contrast in work levels between the different academic years on three different courses (i.e. B.Ed primary, BA Secondary, Combined Studies) There seems to be no difference between courses and work levels, and instead a consistency amongst the students in relation to increased work levels and expectations as the course progresses.



## 9.8 Information Provision

The focus group sample was asked which type of information they needed whilst studying at the university in order to be able to manage their academic and non-academic commitments. Students commented mostly on the lack of information in relation to what is expected of them in terms of their academic work.

“Guidance on what’s expected, what sort of level you’re working at, whether it’s a D or an A. The first time around you haven’t got a clue have you what you’re producing. That would be useful” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Some guidance on referencing as well for assignments I would have found useful” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“In terms of deadlines and things like that...Procedures, if you do need an extension the procedures you go through. Like getting your grant, which procedures” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“Well it’s like as you say, deadlines, times, dates, like whether your course is like, do you have an exam at the end or an assignment or bit of both, that sort of thing to manage your time” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

One student considered they needed more information related to how to use facilities such as the learning centre.

“Again going back to the learning centres and learning how to use all the facilities there would be useful” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

The focus group and individual interviews highlighted that information provision was perceived by the students to be lacking at the university. They were not aware of where to gain information when faced with a need for information. Students responded that most of the information they have found for themselves, mostly by word of mouth from other students.

“I think most of it we’ve just learnt ourselves really just ‘oh you’ve found this out’” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“But most of the information I got was from the likes of other students...The student grapevine. It’s been very important” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“But the phones has been quite hot hasn’t it. Just talking to each other really isn’t it” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I’m thinking that most of the information I probably already know...But general information I think I must have just picked it up along the way or something” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“There’s five of us living in our house and there’s five next door we’re all doing exactly the same course, there’s going to be someone who knows what to do within us lot and then also the PE side of things you have the same lecturers all the time and so you get to know them and you get to know when you can just go up and speak to them if you have got a problem” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



The above quotes highlight the effectiveness of informal channels of communications, that being, how students gain information and pass on information throughout the student community. Though such channels of communication may be effective and useful for the students, there seemed to be a reliance on this method of obtaining information due to inconsistencies in other more formal methods of information provision.

The students also commented that the information provided by the different campuses of the university was not well organised, helpful or consistent in its approach.

“I like the fact it’s on lots of different sites apart from there’s all the drawbacks of the information not being passed around and that kind of thing” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Lack of communication between the sites academically speaking...That sort of thing” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“It’s a bit of a pain if you have to go to a different campus to hand your assignments in and the fact that admin between the sites isn’t really that great” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Don’t think the notice boards here are very good but I don’t think the notice boards anywhere in the university are very good. Doesn’t seem to be any thought or planning behind, it’s like here’s a gap stick it there” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Sometimes you just always feel like you’re on this constant hunt for information, but I think you get used to the organisation here being so bad that you either give up or don’t find out or ask somebody who did it last year...So it can affect your studies if you’re worked up with things already and you’re trying to hand something in by a deadline and you can’t find the vital thing you need to know...It’s those little instances” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Many of the students suggested a need for a central access point where information could be obtained, and felt that they did not know where to go to get the information they needed. Students suggested,

“No central point...I think if you’re on that course we ought to have been given somebody who would be our tutor in the campus area” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I suppose it would help if there was somewhere you could check...you get a lot of information but it’s very disjointed” (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

“There’s some notice boards and things are sort of perhaps advertised but not made aware of, you wouldn’t know what was going on really at all. So there is no, you don’t know what’s going on” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).



“Don’t bother because you don’t find things out. I mean I have gone to registry a few times since they’ve had registry but I found it useless so I haven’t bothered” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I think the registry’s a good idea and having a student access points a good idea” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“The worst thing in this university on all the sites is the fact that there is no central, there’s so many of us working at different modules at different sites there’s no central place to combine all that information” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Students’ used a variety of avenues for information besides other students, such as lecturers, the student registry, notice boards and the library. Students commented,

“I think the information from the library is good like the group work and the assessment and things...I just think more help finding tutors and counsellors and people who can help you would be of more help because I don’t think I’ve really had that...Because it’s not always written down information you want, it’s information you want from specific people” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“We’ve been sort of counselled by our tutors every time we’ve gone in...I’d come in when I’d have problems about every two weeks. Ask him about lesson plans or hints and tips on how to make your lesson better or just general information like that...we can contact them by e-mail, they’d give us their home e-mail, university e-mail and course leader gave us a mobile number as well to all the class so if we ever needed any information we could get it...the tutors were here every Tuesday between five and six and a lot of people would come and get information off them” (Access Route F, B.Ed Primary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“Right at the beginning you get loads of paperwork...They give you module guides at the beginning of every lecture and try and tell you this is what we’re going to be doing over the next couple of weeks, this is when you have to have your assignments in. So they are very, very good and try and tell you as much as they can before hand...It’s made me know where I’m going...So no the information they have given me is good...If anything it’s been positive, knowing where you’re going” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I guess yes, \*\*\*\* has sort of counselled me academically and been aware sort of on a personal side what’s been going on...so although pastorally he hasn’t actually advised me, when I turn up to see him he knows and that’s quite a nice feeling” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Face-to-face contact was preferred by some of the students. They considered that this not only enabled an individual staff member to be responsible for providing particular areas of information, but also felt that it was the most reliable source.

“People like to have contact with somebody else because you think oh that’s the person I’ve got to see. I know his face or her face, I know where their office is” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I think it’s set in stone then isn’t it. If somebody tells you, you know” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).



Not living on campus and not having computer access at homes were influential factors on how the students' preferred to obtain information.

"The internet and facilities, and e-mail facilities are excellent here again if your living on campus or at the university a lot. I haven't got the internet or anything at home then so I couldn't access any information. So if there was nobody to tell me I hadn't really got time...unless you're there all the while where you can nip on at any time and get the information off, otherwise that sort of method is no good" (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"The best way for me, because of the travelling, would be when you come to your lectures if there's any information or anything you should know perhaps then, about that module, or about, you know, sort of information to do with anything really" (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

Whilst discussing the use of information used to help make decisions within higher education, student comments concluded that information provision was perceived to be inadequate and that their choices were not always 'informed' choices.

A few of the students' commented that the responsibility of gaining information should be on the students themselves, and that though information is needed it is up to the student to look for it.

"I'd like to be able to go and see somebody or they ask to come and see me at specific times suitable...So the students can't complain, they've had the choice to have a look and they've had the opportunity to get information...Students, the onus is on the student not on the lecturer or the university. You've got choice then" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"I did go on the library tour in the first year but to be honest it all flew out of my head fairly soon...I never used journals until this year and I know that in some assignments in my third year I was probably marked down for not doing it but to be honest I didn't know how to find them...that would have been helpful if someone had pointed that out. The Harvard system I would have liked to have known a lot more about that...But I mean I suppose really that is my own fault, you know I could have gone and found out really and tried...I think if you're ignorant of things you're just not going to achieve as well as you...It's not exactly level playing field because the people who do know things have got greater opportunities to use what they've got and you're at a disadvantage" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The students commented on the need for more careers guidance, particularly towards the end of their course in relation to interviews and completing application forms. Students commented,

"Careers counselling I wasn't very happy with at all. We had no help whatsoever with how to fill in application forms, they told us to go to the careers...we couldn't go while we were on teaching practice because obviously their office hours we were teaching" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



“I think maybe careers like on interviews and stuff would have been helpful. Also I know there is someone to do with learning support but I’ve never been...It might have been just my lack of effort trying to find them but I don’t think it’s very openly shown where they are” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Once when I wanted to take the time out, the year out to have my daughter I wanted really to discuss what my options were because I was feeling desperately sick and I didn’t want to mess my degree up because I was on a nice steady flow...I had to make that choice but there was nobody there to talk to, to make the choice...if I’d have had some personal tutor or counsellor they might have said well you can work your way through it, there’s this, that, and the other options to you. It would be nice to have the option...If they haven’t got that support network some students might make the choice and say well I’m not coming back. I think you just do your own thing and make your own decisions and if you don’t make it it’s a bit tough” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

The students consequently had a mixture of views in relation to information provision. Some students felt restricted by the lack of information and careers support and the lack of any definite location from where to obtain information or support. Other students felt they had obtained the necessary levels needed and that the responsibility of obtaining information should be place on the students themselves. Though the students felt, in most cases, that they had found the information one way or another, the lack of information provision was a definite issue, and one that had placed constraints on their learning experiences and time.

## 9.9 Summary

The box incorporated into the theoretical model of this study represents the experiences of students whilst studying in higher education. The model is an attempt to understand students’ perceptions of individual and organisational needs against actual experiences, thus invoking coping strategies and colonisation activities.

The examination of a modular programme of learning enabled the comparison between perceived choices and actual choices to be examined. Overall, the students felt that they had, to varying degrees, flexibility and choice on a modular programme of study, highlighting opportunities for the students to be colonisers of their educational pathways more so than ‘copers’ of their situations. However, this study found that in most instances the students were both colonisers and ‘copers’ at the same time, managing their studies to the best of their abilities and for their own personal development within a range of constraints.



Issues such as the 'bunching' of assessments, clashing of module times, the influence of the university being a multi-site institution on choices made, and pre-requisites, were found to be significant influences on student module choices. Though the students saw such factors as restrictive in one sense, the flexibility of a modular system also enabled the students to arrange their own personal needs and goals (e.g. child-care, employment) alongside their educational needs and goals by enabling them, to varying degrees, to make choices and manage their own schedules. The findings support the theoretical framework and its presentation of individual needs and constraints and institutional needs and constraints placing demands on the students resulting in choices having to be made.



Chapter 10: Non-Academic Experiences Whilst in Higher Education

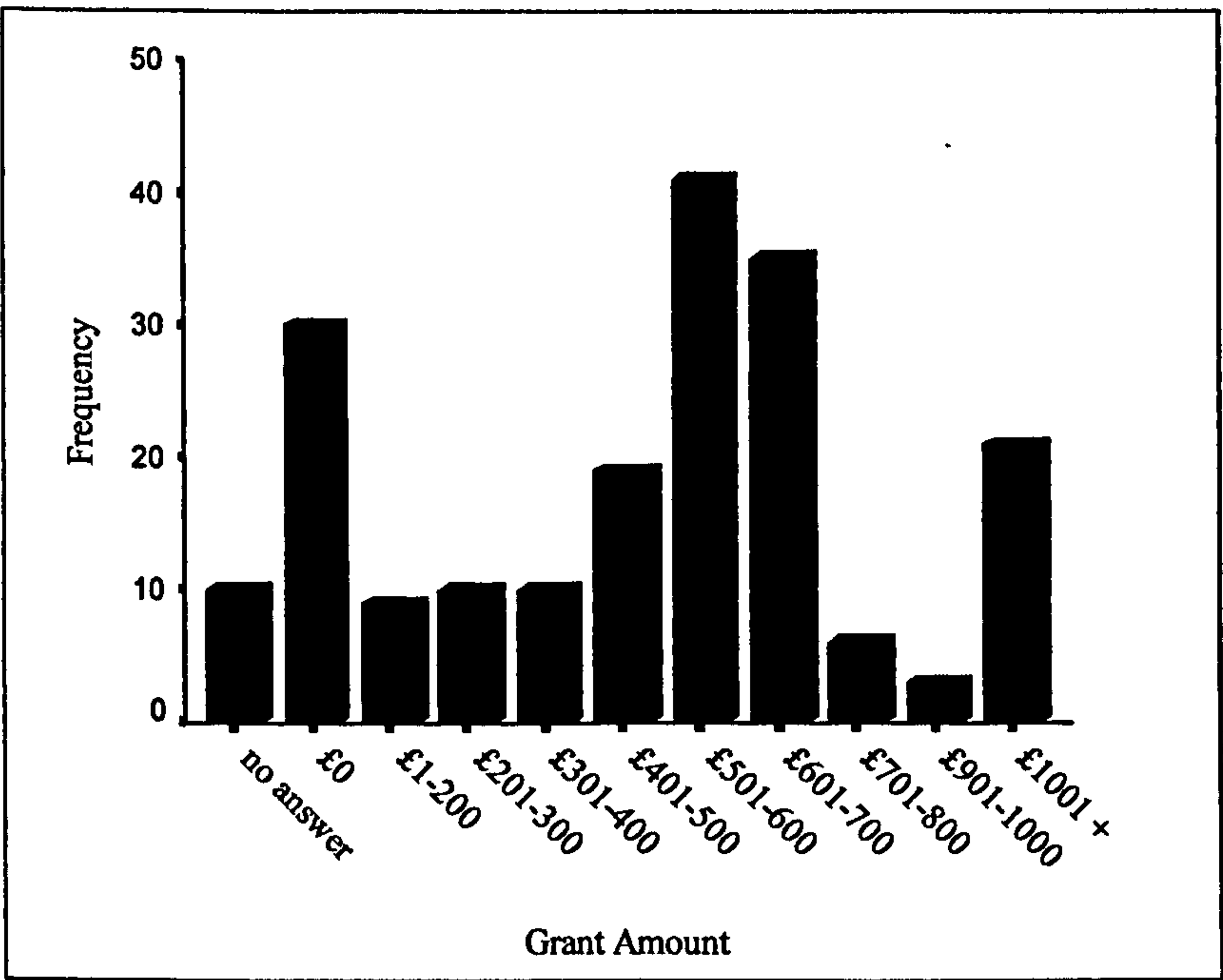
10.1 Financial Support

Students in all three samples (i.e. questionnaire survey, focus groups, interviews) were asked to discuss their financial positions whilst studying in higher education in relation to five main areas; grants; parental contributions; student loans; predicted debt levels; employment.

10.1.1 Grants

The questionnaire sample was asked to indicate the amount of grant they received each term. The results can be seen on chart 10.1.

Chart 10.1: Value of Grant Received by Students: Questionnaire Sample



*Note: the questionnaire survey was conducted before the maintenance grant for students' in higher education was abolished and before tuition fees were introduced.*

Over half of the questionnaire sample (101-52%) received no grant at all. 4 (2.1%) students withheld this information. The other 45.9%(n=89) of students received a grant. Of the students who did receive a grant, 67% (n=66) of students received more than £500 per term.



Five students from the individual interviews had received maintenance grants to help them throughout their studies. Students stated,

“I’ve had a grant every year, I’ve been eligible for a grant so I’ve been lucky in that respect...I think if you can work the system with reserving the books and everything you can have a book you want...I haven’t needed to buy them... I’m running out of money more quickly this year because obviously your grants less” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I’ve got a student loan...Basically I get a full grant as well but that really just covers accommodation and not bills or anything. And then each holiday like summer, Easter and Christmas I’ve got two jobs which I go to back at home and they always give me work so I work full-time really when I go home for holidays” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“With my grant and my parents have been very supportive financially...I’ve got an overdraft for about three, four hundred pounds but my parents do support me a lot financially...Another reason actually why I stayed at home...I don’t have to pay for the food, I don’t have to pay any rent, don’t have to pay any bills so. I can virtually live off my grant” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“My savings and I get a full grant and in the last six weeks I’ve got an overdraft but I didn’t have one before that” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I’ve worked during the summer, every summer and I’ve got a grant, full grant...I think I’ve managed really well actually” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Students who had received a grant had used other financial avenues to support themselves. Students either had savings, or worked, or had taken out student loans or bank overdrafts. These findings represent the lack of financial capital available to many of the students and thus the financial difficulties students face and the impossibility for students to survive solely on their maintenance grant. For those students, however, who remained to live at home (Access Route B, Access Route F) they found it easier to survive on a maintenance grant as they did not have the financial outgoings of students who were living independently and away from home.

### 10.1.2 Parental Contributions

The students were asked to specify which types of financial support they received whilst studying. 11.3% (n=22) of the students were supported financially by their partners compared to 38.7% (n=75) who were supported financially by their parents. Of the 75 students who were supported by their parents, 64 were of the age group 20 years or below.



The individual interviews revealed that the students used a variety of sources for income. Only one (1 of 4) of the students aged 20 years old or below on entry to the university were supported financially by their parents.

“My parents, they’ve paid for me. My parents apparently are rolling in it so I weren’t allowed a grant and I’ve been struggling ever since...my Dad earned something like £30 a year too much to get a grant” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Many of the mature students from both the focus group interviews and the access route interviews felt that they could not have managed to study due to their limited access to finances if it was not for the help of the families and their provision of financial capital. Examples of students’ comments include,

“We wouldn’t have survived if my father hadn’t have given me some. Because my little one, he’s had to be in day nursery and having to pay for that and I don’t get that big a grant to cover it so we would have been in tremendous debt” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Family help. I couldn’t have managed without the help of my mom and dad and things like that you know. They said I’m sure it would have been cheaper to send you at eighteen. I said it wouldn’t, it wouldn’t” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I’ve only had to borrow money off my mom and dad a couple of times so I think I’ve done quite well. I’ve only had to borrow my rent twice so I’m doing quite well” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“My dad’s working so he did support me a lot financially...I think you’ll find that in Asian families that if you want something for your education or if you want to pay for your education they’d be more than willing to do it because they think of it as an investment” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

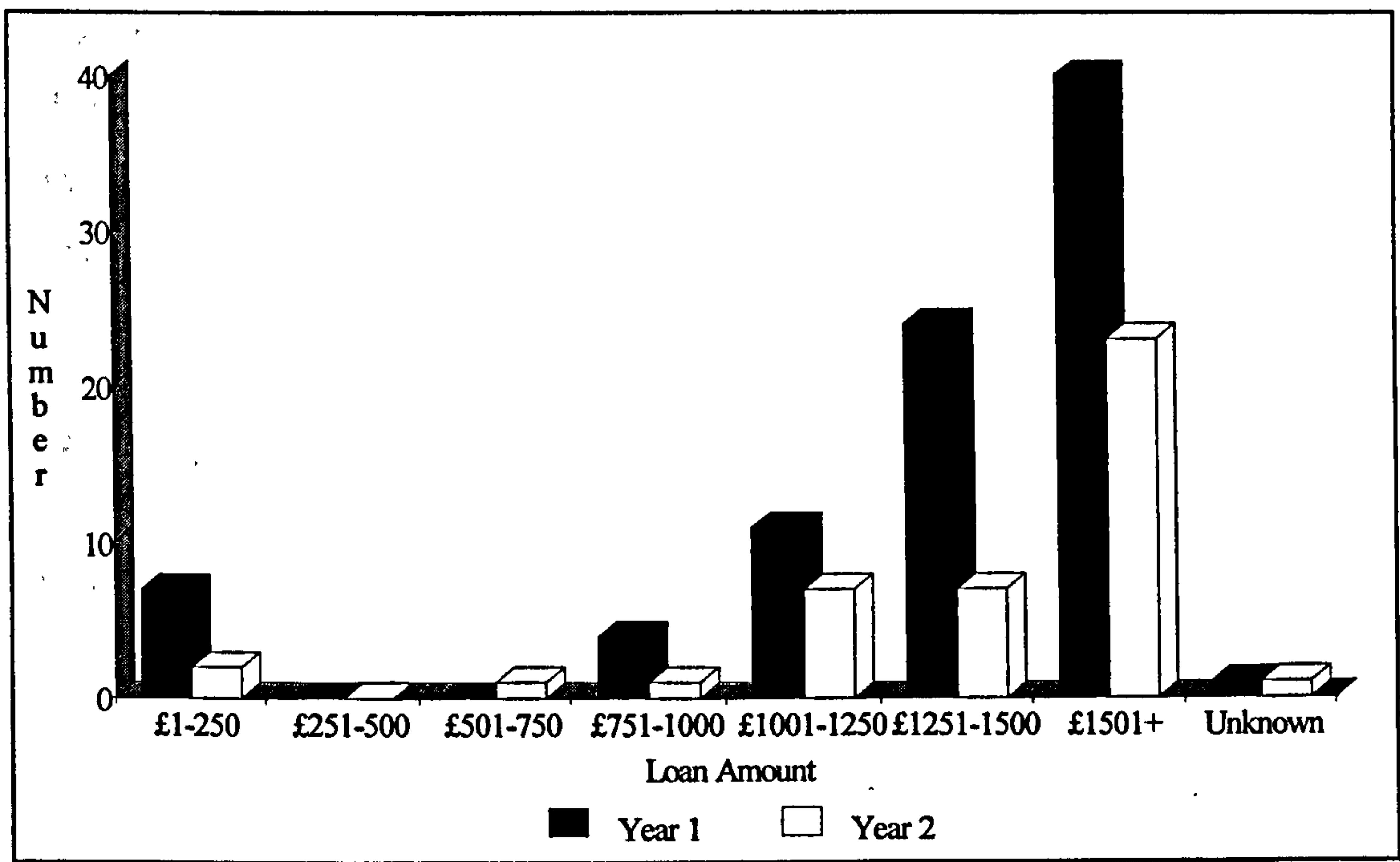
This suggests that funding is not a straightforward subject. The students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university, like the mature students, use many of the different avenues through which financial aid can be acquired. Bank overdrafts were used by 37.1% (n=72) of the students, with 51% (n=99) had taken out student loans. The students, however, did not take for granted that their parents, where applicable, would support them financially, and seemed ‘proud’ when they were managing well by themselves.



10.1.3 Student Loans

Data representing the number of students from the questionnaire sample taking out student loans and the value of the loans is represented on chart 10.2.

**Chart 10.2: Loan Value by Year of Study: Questionnaire Sample**



There were 87 students who had taken out student loans in their first year of study. 46% (n=40) had taken out loans of £1501 or above, and 27.6% (n=24) had taken out loans for between £1251-£1500. 12.6% (n=11) students had taken out loans to the value of £1001-£1250, and 8.1% (n=7) to the value of £1-£250. 4.6% (n=4) of the students had taken out loans to the value of £751-£1000. 1.1% (n=1) of the students did not specify the loan value.

A total of 42 students had taken out student loans in their second year of study. 54.8% (n=23) of these students had taken out loans for £1501 or more. 16.6% (n=7) students had taken out loans to the value of £1251-£1500, 16.6% (n=7) to the value of £1001-£1250. 4.8% (n=2) students had taken out loans to the value of £1-£250 with 2.4% (n=1) of students taking out a loan of between £751-£1000. 2.4% (n=1)



had taken out a student loan to the value of £1-£250, and 2.4% (n=1) did not specify the loan value.

Almost half (n=87) of the students had taken out student loans in their first year of study. A further 42 students had taken out a student loan during their second year of study. 86.2% of those students who had taken out student loans during their first year and 88% of those in their second year had received loans of £1000 or more, suggesting high debt levels once their course is completed. These figures too show a disparity in the levels of student loans, and suggest that social factors may be important for some students acquiring high debt levels.

The focus group and access route interview samples showed a necessity for, and a degree of dependency on student loans due to a lack of financial capital. Students commented,

“I’ve had a student loan. That bought my computer the first year. That was it. It was gone. And it paid for the child care the second year...Savings have gone” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I’ve just had one in the last year, I’ve had a loan because I finished work and I hadn’t got any income at all so I needed something” (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I thought I’d never get myself into debt with the bank but I come to the situation where I had to get myself into debt so I had to take out a loan. And after it I thought I don’t really care no more. And after that loan expired I just went and got another one and got another one and I just didn’t care. And I think that’s sad. It’s unnecessary and sad you should get yourself into that situation because of the financial constraints that you have” (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

“I’ve just had a loan in the last two years and that was purely and simply to buy the computer. And I work on a Saturday to earn money for myself to go out and that’s it really” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“As much student loan I can lay my hands on...I work as well...Have to like pay as much of my credit card off in the year so that I can live off it in the summer” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female 35-39 yrs).

“I have two student loans, no this will be my third” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, <20 yrs).

The quotes highlight that students had taken out student loans for ‘perceived’ necessities such as computers, but mainly for additional monetary income. One student commented that due to be used to living cheaply, she had not had to take out a student loan.



“I’ve never had a student loan...I reckon I think expecting me to go three whole years without using anybody else’s money is like pushing it a bit...I’ve just managed. I mean I’m so used to living cheaply anyway that if I haven’t got the money I can do it. I haven’t done McDonalds or the pubs or anything like that...Well quite honest I haven’t got enough time to work for three and a half quid an hour” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Students who had taken out student loans had used the additional finance to pay for what they saw as necessities such as computers and child-care. This finding highlights the inter-relationship between different types of capital, as a lack of relational-social capital through support networks resulted in some students lacking supportive child care, and due to restricted financial capital, many students with children had to take out loans to pay for child care. Both a lack of relational-social capital and financial capital, therefore, placed such students in a position where choices were limited and the only option was to incur debt to provide care for their children. Due to a lack of financial capital available to most of the sample, it may be accurate to presume that without the student loans system many of the students would not have been able to financially survive higher education.

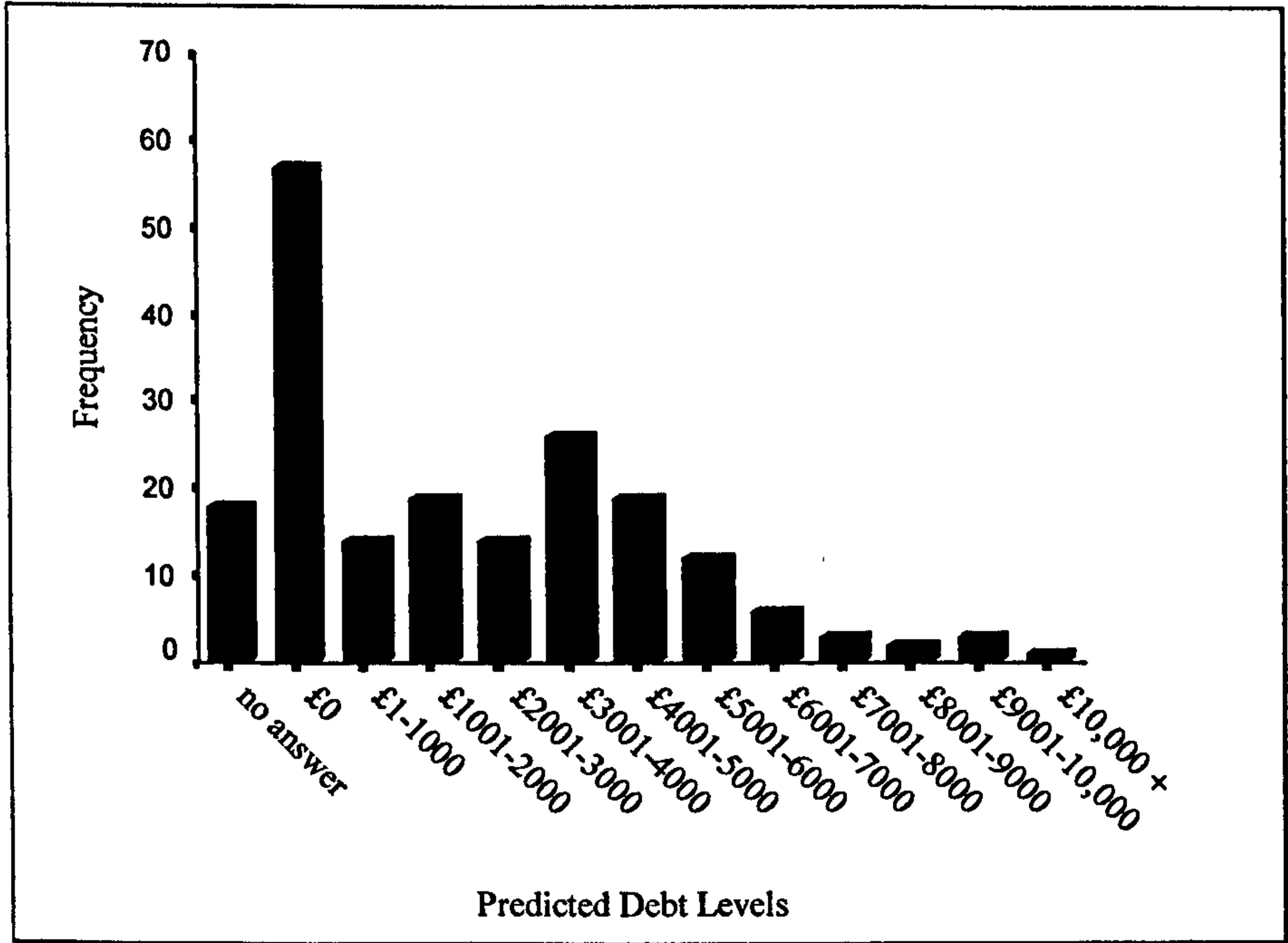
#### **10.1.4 Predicted Debt Levels**

The questionnaire sample was asked to predict how much debt they expected to owe once their studies were completed (chart 10.3).

29.4% (n=57) of the students predicted they would have no debts once their studies were completed, compared to 70.6% (n=137) who predicted they would leave university with debts. The high debt levels suggests high take up rates of student loans and bank overdrafts, though less than 38% of the students had a bank overdraft and half of the students had taken out student loans.



**Chart 10.3: Predicted Debt Levels after Graduation: Questionnaire Sample**



The focus group sample discussed the issue of debt and opinions were divided. Of those students who had not taken out a student loan, the determination to leave university debt free was an issue.

“You try and avoid debt because when you finish the course you hear about students having two or three thousand pounds outstanding. The money has got to be paid back so the first thing you’ll do when you start work is pay back a loan. That seems pointless” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I haven’t had any loans, I haven’t got any overdrafts” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“No I haven’t got a loan either...Most people have had a loan. But then again I think working has supported me really. I wouldn’t have been able to afford my car if I hadn’t have worked. So I mean in that respect it’s been worth it” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

Of those students from both the focus groups and access route interview who did have debt there was a degree of regret and concern in relation to the amount of debt they had to repay after graduating. The students stated,

“We’ve all took out the maximum loan so we’re all in debt up to our eyeballs before we’ve even started. I wish I didn’t have it” (Respondent 6, Combined Studies, Female, 40-44 yrs).

“Well there’s no skiving or anything going on, you know what I mean. We’re not sort of trying to manipulate anything or get anything out of anybody. We’re actually putting out heart and soul into something that’s costing us a fortune to do so” (Respondent 4, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).



“You learn to manage your money very well. Every penny counts” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Because of course there’s still a certain amount of debt you build up over each year and if I hadn’t gone so mad in the first year I wouldn’t have quite as much debt from that year to bring over to the next and what not” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I reckon I’ll be in about ten thousand pounds worth of debt by June next year” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“When I came into Wolverhampton there was a wall of debt on the wall and when I saw it I went oh my god, you know I could definitely put my name there. I’ve managed to keep my head just above water. It is a big struggle, a real big one...I’ve always struggled. This is why I chose to go to university now because my fella was at university before I had the job, now he’s got his qualification I’m there so it’s always been a struggle. So I’ve always had to budget...I know as soon as we had money forget it, I’d never study again” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

A few students who participated in the access route interviews discussed how financial aspects of studying, and a lack of financial capital, affected the learning process and their experiences of studying within higher education. Students stated,

“I think maybe sometimes like worrying about things like if I’m like getting a bit short on cash I’d do, is an extra worry which you could do without really and also on books and everything I’ve never really bought a book for a subject because I can’t really afford it and so you go to the library. It would have been nicer maybe to have bought more books or and also like it’s expensive photocopying and everything, everything adds up” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I mean just the fact you have to think about everything, you have to think about whether you can afford to catch a bus somewhere or whatever...Things like the photocopying cards, especially at the moment...I hardly have the money to get my dissertation done. I can’t really afford to go home and visit my parents, they have to come and fetch me for everything. I think the quality of life isn’t what it would be nice to be but at the same time you know it’s only for so many years and I suppose it makes you look forward to September when I’ll have a job and hopefully have some money. I’ve got no loans, no overdraft...There are books I would have bought if I had the money which I couldn’t do. I mean I know we’re supposed to be able to do it from our grant and everything but it’s not. And the library doesn’t always have the ones you want or that sort of thing...it would have been really nice to have them all but you know I’m coping” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The financial difficulties faced by students studying within higher education seemed to affect some students more than others. Not only did some of the students have to face high debt levels once their course was completed, but they had to manage their money day-to-day, only manageable, however, by adopting more financial resources such as student loans, overdrafts and credit cards. Students commented on the quality of life whilst studying in higher education and the cause of concern and worry finance can become. The impact of poor financial support also impinged on a student’s choice



to purchase books due to the lack of finances to do so. Students also had to lose some of their study time to undertake part-time employment. These findings highlight the significance of financial capital on the students’ experiences of higher education.

10.1.5 Employment

The questionnaire sample was asked whether they worked alongside studying, and if so, how many hours they worked in paid employment. Of the questionnaire sample, a total of 88 (45.3%) students had a part-time job to support their finances whilst studying. The amount of hours worked varied between students. 9 (10.2%) students worked between 1-5 hours per week. 36 (40.9%) students worked between 6-10 hours per week and 22 (25%) students worked between 11-15 hours per week. 21 (23.9%) students worked for 21 or more hours each week. This data is shown on chart 10.4.

**Chart 10.4: Number of Hours Worked in Part-Time Employment: Questionnaire Sample**



Almost half of the students had part-time jobs, showing that employment is becoming a 'normal' part of student life (Deacon, 1994). The increase in student numbers in part-time employment whilst studying questions the concept of a ‘full-time’ student.



Many students are not studying full-time, but instead are dividing their time between studying and employment.

The focus group sample commented on the need to work due to financial needs and demands. Students stated,

“I work Friday and Saturday nights from 9.15 to 7.40 in the morning. And it’s not easy. It hasn’t been easy. I couldn’t give the job up and I’m still there now. Because at the end of the day this place isn’t going to pay my bills. They couldn’t pay all our bills, they just couldn’t do it. But they want you to give work up like you said before” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Actually had two jobs when I started here and the one I had to let go off because it took up all day Saturday and I couldn’t take it doing my night time job as well. I had to come down, I was doing five nights a week when I started here, and I’ve come down to do two nights a week, which although it gives you so much money but it don’t pay for everything you’ve got to pay for” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Primary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Employment during term-time also had implications on available time for studying, and it was found that some students were using potential study time as time to gain necessary finances. The focus group sample commented on various consequences of working whilst studying. One example is,

“Now mine, I suppose mine’s about fifteen, yes about fifteen hours or so. Though I do some nights as well which tends to mess up my sleeping a bit” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

The most significant implication of working in paid employment whilst studying was the affect it had on the students’ academic workload. The concept of having to ‘juggle’ work and studies arose directly or indirectly in many of the students’ comments.

“Okay it’s made it harder for me to get the work done but if that money wasn’t coming in I wouldn’t be able to do the course in any case” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“I’ve missed lectures before at the beginning of the term because I had to stay at home to work an extra week” (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“Yes. I have to miss some things. Can I miss work or how important is it I go to that? Am I going to lose my job? You just have to weigh it up. The other students are good in as much as they’ll take lecture notes for you and things like that. You just have to juggle. No other word for it really...I’ve had to spend less time on actual work and I could have done better but I haven’t had the time. It’s just one of those things” (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).



“Yes, I must confess I had to take sickies for dissertation week which I shouldn’t really, but you know, I couldn’t do anything about it, it’s got to be done. You think well what’s more important. Well obviously the jobs important because if you haven’t got a job how am I going to pay for that, but then if I don’t get this done then I’ve failed my degree, or perhaps not fail but not get a good mark as I expected to get. So you just have to decide what’s more important at that particular time” (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

One student commented that on a modular course it is possible to arrange modules and work times to synchronise with one another to enable the student to study whilst earning money.

“It used to be a Saturday job and then I used to do another day in the week to fit in with here. In that way it is good because you can fit your modules in and like if you do two on one day you wouldn’t have to be here five days a week. That’s good” (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Students found it difficult to work in their positions of paid employment, particularly whilst undertaking a teaching experience placement. This resulted in the students not only working full-time on their teaching placements but also working the number of hours in their part-time job, and students in this position found this difficult and demanding.

“Well for the first year I just did Saturdays and some odd Sundays but it was every Saturday and a couple of Sundays. But like certainly after when I moved to another job I was doing all day Saturday and all day Sunday and plus in the week if necessary which was more often than not really. I shouldn’t really have done all day Saturday and all day Sunday when I was doing the teaching practice, I think that was a bit of a mistake but I managed” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Mal 21-24 yrs).

“The only problem we’ve had because we’re on a teaching course is that there’s certain times when your out in schools. I mean obviously nobody could have a part-time job unless it was evenings but still then it’s going to be hard to juggle that around when you’re on an eight week practice” (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I found my teaching practice hard because I was working. I mean I was only working Saturdays and I run a football team on a Sunday so the only time I’d got to do work was on a night, by the time you’ve got back and done everything you’ve got to do and on a Sunday afternoon and I found it really hard this time, to work as well” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The individual interviews found that not all students worked, though for some students’ employment was one of the many necessary roles they have to fulfill. Students commented,

“If I hadn’t got my daughter I’d be okay. If I hadn’t got my job I’d be okay. But I have to combine studying, my daughter and having a job...I could have improved if I hadn’t got so many other things I’ve got to be doing and got no choice in doing” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-3 yrs).



I've had temporary jobs in the summer but they've had to be temporary part-time jobs in the summer" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

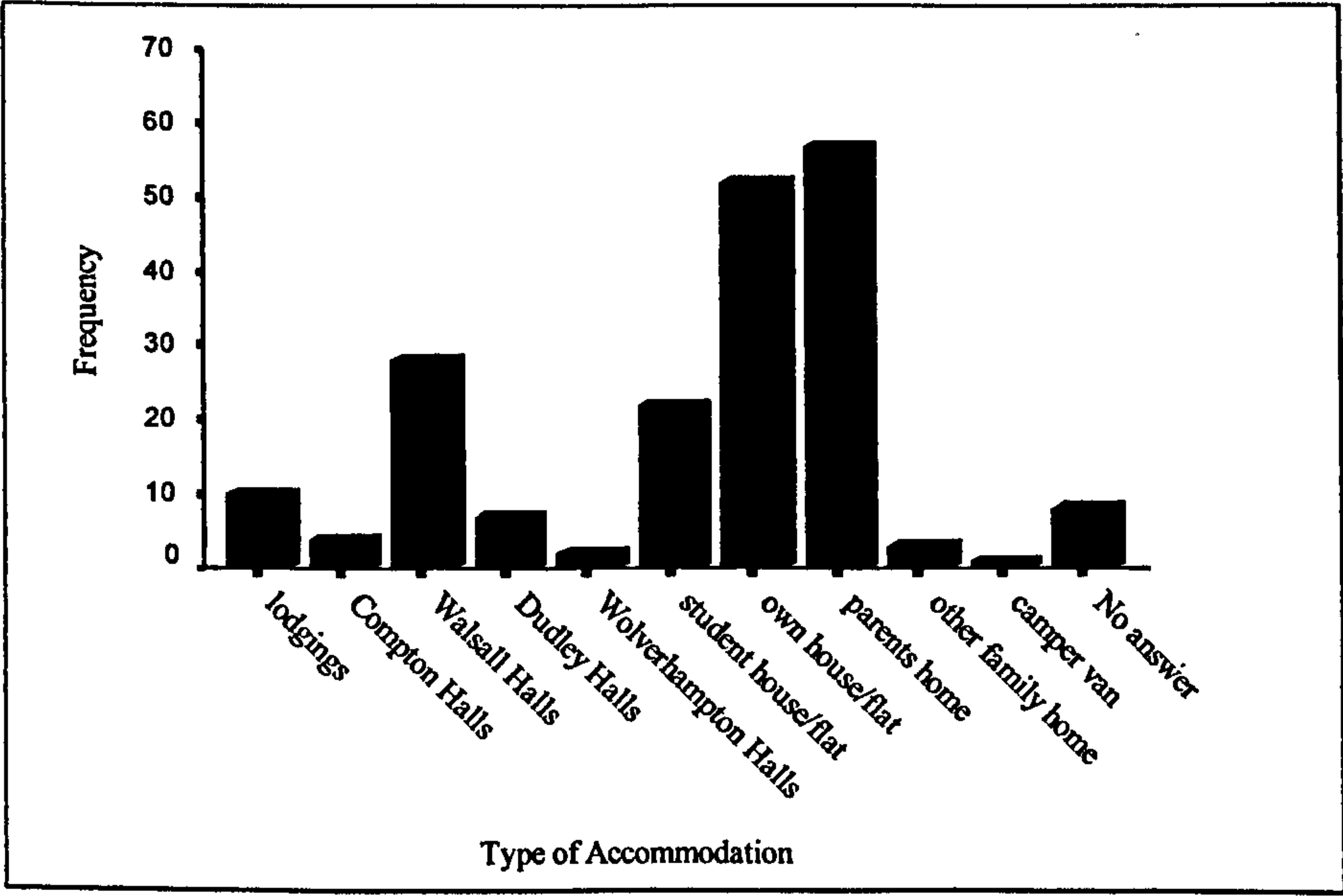
Students used the term of ‘juggling’ in relation to their academic and their employment responsibilities and commitments. Students found it easier to combine employment with a modular programme of study due to the ability to choose which modules to attend and study at which time throughout the week. Students found it difficult, however, to maintain positions of employment whilst on teaching practice due to the increase in hours whilst in schools. Employment may now be considered to be part of the student experience of higher education.

10.2 Accommodation

Accommodation was examined to assess how many students either remained at home, or lived away from home, whilst studying at university (Chart 10.5).

The questionnaire sample showed that 56.3% (n=109) students were either living in their parents' home or in their own home. Of the 26.8% (n=52) students who stated that they were living in their own home, 90.4% (n=47) were mature students with only 3.8% (n=2) being 20 years old or below. 5.8% (n=3) students withheld their age. Of the 29.4% (n=57) students who were living in their parent’s home, 63.2% (n=36) were 20 years old or below with 33.3% (n=19) being mature students. 3.5% (n=2) students withheld their age.

Chart 10.5: Types of Accommodation: Questionnaire Sample





Of the 109 students who were living either in their parents home or in their own home, 71.6% (n=78) stated that they remained at home and in their home region as they were financially better off. 71.6% (n=78) of those students who remained living at home confirmed that this enabled them to have financial or emotional support from their family. 52.3% (n=57) of these students had a part-time job to provide financial support during their studies. 56% (n=61) students remained at home as they wanted to stay in a familiar area, with 54.1% (n=59) students who wanted to remain with their friends.

A total of 21.1% (n=41) students lived in Halls of Residence, of which 68.3% (n=28) were based in the Education site halls of residence. 5.2% (n=10) students lived in lodgings and 1.5% (n=3) students lived with other family members. 11.3% (n=22) of students shared student houses and 0.5% (n=1) student lived in a camper van. 4.1% (n=8) of the students did not state their type of accommodation.

Over half of the students remained living at home (56.3%) of which the majority were mature students living in their own home, or traditional students living in their parental home. The number of students remaining at home was considered to be due to a range of factors, including less availability of and poor standards of student accommodation, additional financial pressures, and the rise in mature students with their own property (Leonard, 1995). Over 70% of the students who lived at home stated that they were financially better off. 67.1% of those students who lived at home had a part-time job, and 12.9% lived near to home and had part-time jobs. 56% of those students who remained at home wanted to stay and study in a familiar area.

Of the 85 students who stated that they were employed in part-time employment, 67.1% (n=57) were living at home and 12.9% (n=11) were living near to their home region. 8.2% (n=7) were living away from home and 1.2% (n=1) was living far away from home. 10.6% (n=9) stated that region had no impact on their choice of university.



The focus group and the individual interviews obtained data as to why students' chose to either stay at home or move away from home to study. Those students who chose to move away from home recognised the financial implications as a result of that decision.

"The amount of times we've frozen in our house and just sat there because we can't afford to keep the heating on you know. And yes we did have to put my duvet downstairs and we all just sat watching the telly under the duvet just to save money" (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Those students who had moved away from home to study were mostly students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university, and felt they had gone through a life changing process, a transition from home life to adulthood.

"You don't go back home...You move on. It's like an in between place, being at home with your family, and then sort of moving out, it's like this nice little secure identity...you're still your parents son or daughter but you're not living at home, and then you've got this nice security thing I'm a student, you know. And then to moving away and being an adult" (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"I think the way that we've done it, sort of a year in halls and then three years in rented accommodation I think it's taught us a lot about life and sort of, financial independence, sorting out problems, you know, bills, maintenance" (Respondent 5, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"Totally different living in halls and living in your own accommodation...Coping with washing machines breaking down...And it's prepared us for life now as well so when I do move on, even if I don't stay in the West Midlands, I move on, I know how to connect myself up to gas, I know how to do the telephone" (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Students living away from home enjoyed the social life at university more than those students who had remained at home, and recommended moving away from home to study in order to learn about life, meet new people, and enjoy the student experience.

"And you make the best friends, the people that you live with, you learn to tolerate people...There is a big difference of university life if your going to be away from home student or a study from home student...There are options and I think perhaps students aren't aware of the difference it's going to make to them for the three or four years" (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"I lived in halls in the first year...I thought it would be the best chance to get to know people...everyone's thrown in together...then hopefully you just find your feet and find your friends which is what we did...Halls was a good laugh because it was just a holiday camp, it was forever staying up 'till five o'clock in the morning...not really getting an awful lot of work done and by the end of the first year we could see how work was going to start piling on...We'd settled down a bit then...thought right, we want to move away...you've settled down and you've found your friends, now the next thing is to get your own house so it's a bit more independence again" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



**"I live with four other girls who I lived with when I was in blocks...I didn't know anyone and also I thought it would be a good way of getting to know everyone, it was cheap...I think halls are really for first years. I think in the second year...you just want a bit more privacy...You've made your friends, you've had your laugh and which you still have but you choose your friends a bit more. I wanted a bit more privacy I think"** (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

**"I was in halls for the first two years. I stayed the second year because I was block rep so that meant I got money off my bill which was quite handy. And in the third year I've been sharing a house...I think it seemed like a good way to sort of lead in, to be on campus, to have everything around you, to meet some people...I was a bit worried about being surrounded by eighteen year olds butting my ankles, but actually it was fine"** (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 21-24 yrs).

**"The first year I spent in halls, there were sort of seven of us on one landing and the one's above who shared a kitchen...it's like sheltered accommodation isn't it, it's a step away from home but you've still got people around to help even if you're surrounded by other students who are in the same boat whereas I wouldn't have known where to start looking for accommodation at that point and you could have just ended up in a house with three people you hated or whatever whereas there's more choice for sort of people you should be able to get on with...But it's things like it's so noisy at night...I just wanted the extra responsibility really and I felt it was time to move on and sort of learn about paying bills and stuff. Get that life experience"** (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Of the students who were 20 years or below on entry to the university and who had remained at home to study, they felt that they had not had the same social life that those students living away from home had experienced. The students who lived at home felt a division between themselves and the students who were living away from home whilst studying. Students commented,

**"I'm glad I stayed at home as I said the financial thing and like when I get you know, when I do get home I haven't got to worry about cooking and cleaning, because I couldn't cope with it because I'm not domestic anyway...I think our university life has suffered in the sense...not having a sort of university social life so to speak...I think there is a great big divide between people who live here and people that don't. I think there's advantages and disadvantages on both sides but I think there is a big divide"** (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

**"I think you do miss out actually here and studying from home. I think you miss out on a lot, a whole different life experience. But I mean that's a choice you have isn't it, you know, you can make that choice"** (Respondent 6, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

**"But like we're saying it's because we've stopped at home and we've got friends from school and friends from work but I mean if you were a person coming from here and perhaps you didn't, was in the same position as we were living at home, you'd have a right sad life for three years wouldn't you really"** (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Of those students who remained at home and studied at their local university, the main reasons they remained at home were financial considerations and family commitments.



"I wish I was in digs and then I wouldn't have my two teenage children to obstruct my studies. I mean that's been a major problem for me, my children basically. I've had to sort of work around their disasters so it's been a struggle" (Respondent 6, Combined Studies, Female, 40-44 yrs).

"Well as I say, having been here now and seen this when my children get older I will encourage them to go away for the social side" (Respondent 1, BA Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I just lived at home with my parents...Money partly, I just suppose commitments at home...I've got a boyfriend but it wasn't because of him I stayed at home. I just like where I live...I didn't want to go away and sort of change all that. That was it really. Stuck in my ways...I don't think I could have coped with all the extra worries about money and things. I'm glad I stayed at home for that sake...Well as soon as I finish all my money I earn I'm going to be able to spend it on me then, they're going to be paying off their debts" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I didn't want to live in digs or anything and I have children so there's no way I wanted to clean up after a dozen people. If I didn't have had the attachments I probably would have, it wouldn't have bothered me but I've got responsibilities" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-35 yrs).

"I didn't want to move my daughter from school and when I got divorced my ex-husband and I sort of made the positive choice that we would have joint custody and I wasn't prepared to take her away from her dad. And also the work my partner does we have to be near the motorway network so it's central for all that as well" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I think I was pretty sure I'd stay at home. It was an option for a bit but I just thought no I can't. I've got too much responsibility at home, I have to stay at home" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"I lived with my fella and my ten year son...He was already at school at the time and my fella was at university and it's just much more easier, you know like baby sitting commitments, family, friends, that was important. So I wanted to stay local" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Though the majority of the mature students in the sample had remained at home whilst studying, those mature students who had moved into the area to study at the university found living in halls difficult and did not want the same social life as the students aged twenty years or below.

"I lived in halls until the start of this year when I moved out because I just couldn't cope anymore. I was intending to move out anyway at the start of the year but this semester and the beginning of this year I just couldn't cope. It was so bad compared to what it was like the last year in halls the previous two years...I mean you're lucky if you get into a quiet block and everything is great but this year was just a nightmare. It really was" (Respondent 1, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).

"I live here, just down there just for months and then I moved out. Because in the middle of the night they came back from the pub and they knock on your door, stamping on the floor while sleeping, shouting in the middle of the night. So I had to move out. I live now in private rented accommodation. It's marvellous. Just two minutes walk from here" (Respondent 2, Combined Studies, Male, 35-39 yrs).



There were significant differences as to why students remained at home, and the type of experiences students had whilst at university depending on where they lived. The majority of mature students remained living at home due to non-academic commitments. Those mature students who lived away from home whilst studying felt that their experiences were very different to the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university, not experiencing life as a ‘real’ student. Those students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university who had moved away from home to study felt they had gone through a transitional period in their lives whilst those who remained at home felt that they has somewhat missed out on the whole experience of being a ‘real’ student.

10.3 Social Involvement and Activities

The questionnaire sample was asked to list any recreational activities they participated in at the university. The results are shown on table 10.1 in relation to the age groups of the sample.

**Table 10.1: Students Involved in Recreational Activities  
by Age: Questionnaire Sample**

| Age<br>(Years) | Involved in Recreational Activities (no.) |     |           | Total<br>(no.) |
|----------------|---|-----|-----------|----------------|
|                | Yes                                       | No  | No answer |                |
| <20            | 32  | 52  | 10        | 94             |
| 21-24          | 9   | 17  | 6         | 32             |
| 25-29          | 7   | 14  | 2         | 23             |
| 30-34          | 4   | 10  | 0         | 14             |
| 35-39          | 2   | 12  | 0         | 14             |
| 40-44          | 0   | 4   | 2         | 6              |
| 45-49          | 1   | 1   | 1         | 3              |
| 50<            | 1   | 1   | 0         | 2              |
| No answer      | 1   | 3   | 2         | 6              |
| Total          | 57  | 114 | 23        | 194            |

Only 57 (29.4%) students said they were participants in any university recreational activities, leaving 114 (58.8%) students not involved with any recreational activities at the university. 23 (11.9%) students provided no answer. Of those students that were involved in recreational activities, 32 (56.1%) were aged 20 years or below on entry to the university and 24 (42.1%) were mature students. Only 29.4% of students were involved in any recreational activity at the university or elsewhere. With research suggesting a decrease in the culture of student participation in university



activities in the 1990's (Silver & Silver, 1997), this data too suggests that the decrease is occurring and may be associated with the ages of students. Students from the questionnaire sample wrote down additional comments such as,

"I don't have time for anything else" (Year 2, Combined Studies).

"I wish I saw more of student life - socialising etc" (Year 1, Combined Studies).

One student from the access route interviews reinforced this point and stated,

"I haven't got time...Started off in my first year as one of the Students Union trainers, I just couldn't fit it into my schedule" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The focus group sample and the access route interview samples discussed reasons why they did or did not attend social activities at the university. The majority of the students were not involved in recreational activities provided by the university.

"No nothing. Don't know what's going on. Just come, do lectures, go to the library and go home. That's been it"(Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"It's like friends who have gone to university and they say they have all these balls and everything and we've never had nothing like that" (Respondent 2, BA Secondary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"The quicker you can get back the better for me. The quicker I can get home the better" (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

"I used to be very active, quite sporty person but like I've dropped everything, I don't do anything at all. I haven't been able to" (Respondent 6, Combined Studies, Female, 40-44 yrs).

"I don't even walk anywhere anymore, I haven't got time" (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

"Just because I live too far away really...I live at home and I've got a social life at home and I really haven't got time for anything else anyway so...I just wanted to come here and get my degree and go really" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The mature students considered recreational activities and university social life as relevant to the students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university. Mature students did not feel that the social and recreational side of university life was applicable, or important to them.

"But like I said I never anticipated doing any social sort of side really because all our commitments...the degrees a means to an end really...That's what we came here for" (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).



“Maybe it’s being mature that you think that whereas younger people may think oh yes the social life as well...It’s crucial. And they survive better as well” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I don’t have time. I’d like to but I don’t have much time. I don’t know if they do much for oldies like me anyway...Not with all the reading and the kids and home...It would be good to set up, sounds really boring, but child sitting, swap child sitting so like your night to look after and that and we go out” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

The impact of the university being a multi-site institution had a considerable impact on students attending recreational activities. The students, particularly the female students, also commented on the issue of safety, and having to return home on evenings, often alone. Students felt that the campuses were not user friendly to students who wanted to remain there to attend other activities. Students commented,

“Being at all these different campuses you think oh well they’re doing something there but I’d rather go and do that there and then in the end you just end up not doing it basically” (Respondent 3, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“To be truthful the only thing I’ve seen that I would have been interested in wasn’t on until seven o’clock at night and I haven’t got chance to make it home and back in that time...if it starts at seven your not going to finish until eight o’clock, half eight, nine, and it’s going to be eleven when I get home” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“And the other thing is if you wanted to stay, if you wanted even to stay there’s no facilities on this campus for somebody to actually go and have an evening meal. The refectory’s closed, the union bars closed you know, so, and the shops closed so you haven’t even got a shop where you can go and grab a sandwich out of or anything...I mean it’s just not accessible” (Respondent 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“For the first two years I was hardly at university, I mean I was at home. Although having said that I would have liked to have used, for example, the gym facilities they’ve got here...I would have liked to have got involved with the Islamic Society but they were based in Wolverhampton, the main campus, and I’ve only had one lecture there since the course” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I joined the student union. I did go to the Freshers Fair where you can join something and I did join the Afro-Caribbean Society again and that was it...I haven’t been to anything. In a small way I do regret...but I can’t make the effort now because I haven’t got the time...So the activities I wanted to do were at Walsall and I was based at Wolverhampton so that put me off” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Due to the different campuses providing different activities, students felt that they were limited in choice and could only consider activities based on campuses that were accessible to them. Only one student commented that she participated in any sport activities.



“For the last three years I’ve run the basketball, the ladies basketball club. I started in my first year because I used to play netball and I wanted to do something different so I tried basketball...With the basketball there was a good social life with that because you used to go for a drink after you had your practice and then afterwards you used to go out on celebrations...and you got to know everyone that way” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The majority of the students felt that due to the campus being predominantly sports based, their options for recreational activities were limited to sports. This placed limitations on those students who were not interested in sport as an activity. Students, however, were involved in non-educational and non-university based activities. Students’ commented,

“I think it’s more sort of the confidence aspect of it...I’m not a sporty person. The first group of girls that I got to know they were very sporty and they were very much the ‘in’ sort of girls and especially like the sport side of it, it’s very sort of you have to be the ‘in’ sort...We just do our own social activities away from university and whatever” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Over the last three years I’ve done choir and the chamber choir and the string group...If I want to do sport I’ll get on my bike or go down the gym on my own. It’s quite intimidating here because it’s a sports campus so I don’t want to go down the gym with loads of fit people...I think if you don’t spend lots of time drinking and lots of mornings still in bed you can fit in everything and do everything the way you want to” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I don’t think I’ve been to the union at all this year but I used to... Obviously money’s getting worse and another is that a lot of things that are on don’t really appeal and it’s just as nice to go down town. I was in the Christian Union for three years, I was on the Executive Committee for a year but this year I’ve been too busy and that’s probably it social wise with the university...there has been a lot of work on and so at that point I sort of made a choice that I wouldn’t” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The few students whose comments are provided above were involved in recreational activities. However, there seemed to be a clear distinction between students interested in sports and those interested in other activities. Recreational activities are part of the student experience, and there is a need to recognise and understand that the academic side of university life is not the only part of the student experience and that other factors influence choices and decision-making.

#### **10.4 Multi-site Institution and Use of Transport**

Transport was an important factor to the experiences of students due to the University being a multi-site institution. The questionnaire sample was asked whether they used the university shuttle bus service or private transport when necessary (table 10.2).



**Table 10.2: Students Use of Transport: Questionnaire Sample**

| Type of Transport | Yes<br>(no.) | No<br>(no.) | No answer<br>(no.) | Total<br>(no.) |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Shuttle Service   | 80           | 106         | 8                  | 194            |
| Private Car       | 98           | 87          | 9                  | 194            |
| Total             | 178          | 193         | 17                 | 194            |

A total of 80 (41.2%) students used the University’s shuttle bus service. Students who did not use the service provided a number of explanations. Over half of the students sampled, a total of 98 (50.5%) used a private car for transport. 10 (5.6%) students stated that they did not use the university bus service as it ran at inconvenient times, with 4 (2.1%) students stating that the journey takes too long with 1 (%) student preferring to use public transport.

The focus group sample discussed how they travelled in-between sites to attend different modules. The students had two issues with the university shuttle service. Firstly, the sample felt that the university shuttle service resulted in the journey between the different campuses too long.

“Yes. Well it took me nearly two hours to get here. I wasn’t bothered about getting here it was getting back to my children that concerned me more” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Yes, this is the reason why, because where I used to live it was literally a ten minute walk from Dudley campus, my mom’s. And you think great, don’t have to bother with the bus pass, walk up the road, jump on the shuttle, and great. And then you realise that you’re either going to be like an hour and a half early or half an hour late. So you end up that you have to go and catch a bus. I’ve still got the same thing now” (Respondent 2, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“It’s far too long. They won’t let you off in between. You have to travel from site to site. If they let you off in between like a bus service it would be better but they don’t” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I mean you know, if you’ve got to wait two hours for a shuttle well that’s two hours you know, you can’t be working” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

Secondly, some of the female students were concerned for their safety and argued that the shuttle service had limited drop off points, resulting in them having to return to the university and then walk home alone from the campus.



“On this campus as well they keep changing the bus stops and found that really confusing...Friday the buses run so much later anyway because they get stuck in traffic, it would be really dark by the time you got here and like for me, I didn't want to be dropped off at campus because I have to walk past and it goes past the bottom of my road...they should have another pick up point” (Respondent 5, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“Well I was going to say when you come from Walsall to Dudley you go right past Dudley bus station and I used to every time I was on it I used to get all worked up because I'm going right past where I've got to get back to and it'll be time for the bus and you've got to get to, you've got to go to Dudley and then I've got to catch, either catch a bus or walk ten minutes back into Dudley” (Respondent 4, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“Surely they're not going to mind for the safety of me if I can be just dropped off five minutes up the road rather than having to walk through the dodgy part of Walsall back to my house, you know. Students houses are always placed in the dodgiest parts of town” (Respondents 7, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

The focus group and individual interview samples were asked whether the university being a multi-site institution had any implications on their studies or experiences of higher education. The students' responses were divided. A few students (n=2) students felt that the individual, smaller campuses made the university sites feel more personal and not too intimidating.

“I think it does make it nice because it makes this campus smaller and I think it has got a friendlier sort of atmosphere for that. Because aren't we something like the sixth biggest university in the country altogether and I mean when you sort of think about it like that you feel just so tiny and insignificant whereas with it being split you do have that bit more sort of personal touch” (Respondent 5, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs).

“I think it's a shame that I haven't had a course where I can go over and go on a different site. I like it that it is spread out because at Wolverhampton...you're a number, you're a student rather than a person whereas here you bump into people that you know all the time and you recognise most people and in a way it's more like a family atmosphere here, you all know each other...So I would prefer it to be kept as a multi-site university when to include it all on one site I think would just be horrendous” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

One student felt that due to having to travel to different campuses they had suffered financially due to the cost of travelling on public transport, though weighed costs incurred with time saved.

“It's affected cost, getting to Telford...I had the option of going to Compton and then getting the shuttle service but time wise at the end of the day I'd rather pay for the petrol and save the time because times a premium at the end of the day” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).



Of those students who had not been affected by the university being a multi-site institution, decisions were made to either choose modules on one particular campus, or to choose modules and accept the travelling involved.

“No. Because I try and keep mine local purposely. All those sort of things when you’re choosing your modules you think of your children, you think of the travelling, the time, and you think about whether you can do the module last or whether you’re going to enjoy it, that comes last” (Respondent 1, B.Ed Secondary, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I took the conscious decision that okay I was prepared to travel to Telford because I wanted to do certain courses that I could only do at Telford” (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

“Dudley I could cope with but when it comes to the travel getting back from Dudley with the traffic on a Friday evening it was chaos, it took me an hour and a half to get back...I sold myself the idea that it was better to do Education. Affected choices because it made me decide that there was no way I was going to spend all that time travelling. I’ve got to study, got a family to run and I’m not going to spend half my time on the road, and the cost of petrol” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-35 yrs).

It’s a bit of a pain when I was in Dudley a lot, spent such a lot of your day travelling and it’s quite boring. Sort of sat on a bus for forty minutes or whatever especially through traffic jams and then perhaps you weren’t always there at quite the right time. But you know I don’t think it’s been a big issue really anyway” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs)

The majority of the sample used either public or private transport and found that the shuttle service between the campuses was inefficient in terms of the time it leaves each campus and the duration each journey takes. This had implications on the module choices students made in relation to which site they were based on as students either could not or did not want to spend time travelling between campuses. Students commented how time was an important factor and to waste time travelling in-between campuses was not an option for them. The majority of students, therefore, preferred the individuality of the smaller campuses but did not like to travel in-between the different university sites.

### 10.5 Summary

The non-academic experiences of the students whilst in higher education are also represented in the box of the theoretical model. The organisational structures are represented through factors such as finance, whilst individual structures represent accommodation choices and the degree of non-academic, social activity involvement.



This study found that a lack of financial capital was a constraint for most of the students, resulting in many of the students working part-time and incurring varying degrees of debt. Half of the students received no grant, with just over a tenth of the students supported by their parents. These findings reflect the high levels of mature students who are unlikely to be financially supported by their parents to the required level, if at all. The lack of financial support received by the students from their families, particularly parents, is an example of the lack of financial capital available to the students. The lack of economic capital had wider implications on students' choices, such as having to incur student debt, remain at home to study, and undertake part-time employment whilst attending university full-time. Almost half of the students worked part-time employment, reinforcing debates that employment is becoming an integral part of the student experience.

Findings in relation to type of accommodation whilst studying found that over half of the students remained in their parents, or their own home whilst studying at the university. This seemed to be a 'conscious' choice made by the relevant students due mostly to the responsibilities towards dependents or a lack of financial capital.

The choice to remain at home to study was related to the age and lifestyles of the students who made such choices (i.e. having dependants and not wanting to move them from their home or school) or due to financial implications. Students were, therefore, constrained by financial capital and familial circumstance but became colonisers of their situations, making decisions that suited their situations and would benefit them whilst studying. These findings are examples of students adopting both colonisation and coping strategies whilst in higher education.



Chapter 11: Life Histories and Educational Pathways

A series of nine interviews were conducted to obtain the life histories and key decision-making points of students within higher education. The interview sample entered the university through different access routes, more specifically one of the nine access routes identified by Thombs (1997) that have been adopted within this study. The access routes are presented below for information on table 11.1.

Table 11.1: Access Routes into Higher Education

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Route A: | Students who entered university directly after leaving school  |
| Route B: | Students who left school, went to FE and then directly to university.  |
| Route C: | Students who transferred into FE from the 6 <sup>th</sup> form (with or without completing their course) and then directly to university.  |
| Route D: | Students who entered university via an Access course.  |
| Route E: | Students who gained university entrance qualifications through involvement in a range of different types of educational provision other than Access courses: evening, part-time day, OU, other distance learning etc.  |
| Route F: | Students who entered university via a vocational route i.e. those who gained vocational qualifications that are acceptable for university entrance as part of their training for a form of employment.   |
| Route G: | Students who had been in the higher education system prior to their current course. For example, those who had a degree or degree equivalent qualification or who may have commenced a course that they did not complete.  |
| Route H: | Students who obtained the qualifications necessary for university entrance during their school career (or equivalent FE programme), left the education system and entered university at a later date. In the meantime they had no contact with the education system. |
| Route I: | Students in the under 20 age group who, in effect, followed Route A but were involved in other activities before starting their university programme.  |

Source: Thombs, 1997, p.95

The nine access routes represent diversity, to varying degrees, of students' experiences prior to, and their educational 'pathways' into, higher education.

The qualitative data obtained from the access route interviews examined the students' experiences whilst at the university and their life histories and educational and life 'pathways'. The data obtained in relation to the students' experiences whilst in the university has been incorporated into chapters 6-10 alongside the data obtained from the questionnaire survey and the focus group interviews (chapters 6-10). The aim of this chapter, however, is to discuss the data obtained from the interviews in relation to the students' educational and personal backgrounds, and to evaluate how these, if at all, influenced their educational pathways and life histories. The aim was to interpret the data obtained from the interviews to develop the theoretical framework of the



study in an attempt to understand the degree to which social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) play an important and influential role in 'determining' students pathways into higher education. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to present, discuss and interpret the data obtained from the access route interviews in relation to life histories and pathways.

A model of adult participation in education developed by Yang (1998) was considered appropriate for a framework for the interviews (see page 90, chapter 5). Though Yang's (1998) approach was essentially statistical, the model was adapted to suit the qualitative aims of this study, though the variables of the model remained intact. Yang's (1998) model focussed on five key variables that affected an individual's predisposition towards participation in adult education. These five variables are: socio-economic status; schooling experience; attitude toward education; self-evaluation; participation in adult education. Each of the five variables was used as a guide to a series of questions that were considered appropriate for the qualitative data collection of the study. The interview schedule is shown in Appendix 6. Each of these five variables has been used as headings within this chapter, and the data was obtained in the light of the theoretical interests of the study. The questions, therefore, were written with the intention of gaining an insight into the colonisation activities and coping strategies adopted by the students whilst studying at the university, and the degree to which social capital and cultural capital were available to them. The intention of the interviews was to evaluate the impact of the five themes (Yang, 1998) and to determine whether they had a cumulative effect or weighed differently in their effect on student's decision-making processes, educational and life pathways, and experiences whilst at the university.

Before discussing the findings of the access route interviews, Table 11.2 on the following page provides the basic characteristics of the student participants. The majority of the students were female and White (European). Just below half of the students had a partner and dependents, were aged 20 years or below on entry to the university, and was studying the B.Ed Primary qualification, though characteristics were associated with access route followed into higher education.



**Table 11.2: Characteristics of Access Route Students**

| Access Route | Course           | Sex    | Age on Entry to HE | Ethnic Group     | Marital Status | Dependents     |
|--------------|------------------|--------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| A            | B. Ed Primary    | Female | <20 years          | White (European) | Single         | None           |
| B            | B. Ed Primary    | Female | <20 years          | White (European) | Single         | None           |
| C            | B. Ed Primary    | Female | <20 years          | White (European) | Single         | None           |
| D            | Combined Studies | Female | 30-34 years        | White (European) | Married        | Children       |
| E            | Combined Studies | Female | 35-39 years        | White (European) | Cohabiting     | Children       |
| F            | BA Secondary     | Male   | 21-24 years        | Pakistani        | Single         | Family members |
| G            | BA Secondary     | Female | 25-29 years        | Black Caribbean  | Cohabiting     | Children       |
| H            | Combined Studies | Female | 25-29 years        | White (European) | Single         | None           |
| I            | B. Ed Primary    | Female | <20 years          | White (European) | Single         | None           |

**11.1 Socio-economic Status**

The socio-economic status of the students’ parents was the first variable identified in Yang’s (1998) model of adult participation in education. Five indicators of socio-economic status were identified by Yang (1998) and these were; father’s education; mother’s education; family income; father’s occupation; and household items index. The interviews in this study focussed on the first four indicators (i.e. father’s education to father’s occupation). The study, however, did not use the household items index and instead changed the question of father’s occupation to parental occupations, and incorporated a question related to family views on education. It was considered important that both parental occupations were obtained as family structures and incomes may no longer rely solely on the male head of the household.

**11.1.1 Parents Educational Backgrounds**

The educational achievements and qualifications of the students’ parents, and the extent to which these provided the students with varying degrees of human capital, were examined in the access route interviews to review any possible relationships on the students’ educational choices and pathways. One student (Access Route B) did not provide an answer.



From the students' responses it was evident that parental education levels varied, ranging between no educational achievements to vocational training for a specific career. Three of the students' had parents with little education. These three students commented,

"They've been here maybe about twenty to twenty-five years. They had very little education because they came from a poor family so work was a bigger issue than actually getting educated. That's why a lot of Asian families came to this country for work" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"When she come to England as well she worked in the QE, I think she was a cleaner and they could see all the questions she was asking that she would have made a good nurse and then my dad wouldn't let her take up qualifications...she had the brains but she wasn't allowed to use it I think by her parents and her husband" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"Neither of them are qualified at anything really. My mom left school when she was about sixteen, went into work, did a few jobs, met my dad, got married, was a housewife...My dad left school at about fifteen or sixteen and he got a job...and he worked for them until he was in his thirties, just working on the hydraulics. He enjoyed it but I don't think he had any qualifications that could be passed over...he hates his job so much now and he's been doing it for so many years that he's just never wanted any of us to be in the same position" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Two of the three students' quoted above had parents who came to England from overseas, and had not received much education, if any at all. Issues such as coming from a poor family, and gender roles (i.e. mother not being allowed to educate herself due to her husband and family) were noted as influential factors on parents' education levels. The third quote (Access Route I) in particular highlights how the low parental education levels has influenced her fathers occupation and his opinion of her future career as the student stated, "he hates his job so much now and he's been doing it for so many years that he's just never wanted any of us to be in the same position". The student's awareness of her father's level of discontentment, and awareness of the value of education for his children, was thus a part of the student's cultural environment (i.e. cultural capital) in which she has grown up. It may be presumed to have had a significant impact on her choice to enter a career in which she will enjoy and be satisfied, therefore, not placing herself in the same position as her father. At the same time, valuing education by itself may not be sufficient. What is important is also the knowledge of how to support children to achieve in education. Parental knowledge of this, and thus support, may therefore be available in the abstract but not substantially in the practice. Additionally, the level and type of education considered desirable may itself be limited by knowledge and experience.



The remaining five students from the access route interviews commented that one of their parents had studied and achieved either O levels ( $n=1$ ) or vocationally orientated courses ( $n=4$ ). There were no significant differences between students who had parents with vocational qualifications. The students commented,

“I think my mom she might have got one or two possibly three O levels, and I think my dad got one O level in Art” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“My mom’s a nurse and she went to nursing college but she didn’t go straight from school...she left school at sixteen then was a secretary until she was about eighteen and then she went on to train to be a nurse. And my dad’s a plumber, self-employed, he didn’t go onto further education” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“He went to college before he was nabbed by the Germans...So his education was cut a little short...She just went straight into nursing, left school, straight into nursing just working her way through nursing. At the time there wasn’t college or anything for nursing you just learnt on the job as it was” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Well they both left school at fifteen. My mom had had a scholarship to Art School, her first year and then she decided she wanted to work. My dad went into an apprenticeship as a mechanic” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Mom’s a New Zealander so she was at a private girls school until she was I think eighteen and then she went straight into teacher training...Dad stayed at school till he was eighteen, did A levels and then he did the first couple of years of the degree but I think he failed, he failed the resits and he got offered a job as far as I know and he’s been with the same firm pretty much all the way through” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Half ( $n=4$ ) of the students’ had one parent who had continued their formal education post-school, though 3 students had parents with no education at all. The degree of assistance from the cultural capital of the parents was limited, with only one student commenting how her father’s occupation had made a direct impact on their opinion of her future career. None of the students formally related their parents’ education levels to their own educational pathways, though there does appear to be a general predisposition to further learning though not necessarily in an educational institution. In the light of these findings it is necessary to examine other influential factors, such as cultural capital and relational-social capital through the home environment, influence of peers, and family encouragement and support for education, to recognise other factors that influenced the students’ decisions to continue their education.

### 11.1.2 Parents Occupations

Parental occupations were asked for in the questionnaire survey, and were discussed in more detail in the access route interviews. The aim of the access route interviews



was to examine the possible connection and effect parental occupations may have on students' choices of future occupations and the continuation of their education. It was found that the majority (n=6) of the students had parents' who were in occupations classified as white collar clerical, skilled manual, semi-skilled or unskilled. These students commented,

"My mom...she does clerical work, admin sort of assistant and my dad is something along the lines of a sales adviser manager for a pension company" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"My mom's a doctor's receptionist and my dad's a heating engineer or plumber whatever you want to put" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"She's a some sort of purchase ledging clerk for British Steel" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"My moms a housewife and my dad's a machine operator" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"She's retired now. She worked how many years, at the QE cleaning. I think she was called domestic assistant but I said she was a cleaner...He worked at Austin Rover on the production line" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs)

"My mom I think she left school when she was about sixteen, went into work, did a few jobs, met my dad, got married, was a housewife...My dad left school at about fifteen or sixteen and he got a job with \*\*\*\*\*" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Three students had one parent who had worked in a professional occupation, i.e. nursing, engineering, and electronic engineering.

"My mom's a nurse and she went to nursing college but she didn't go straight from school she was a secretary and stuff before...And my dad's a plumber, self-employed, he didn't go onto further education but he said it was because of money really because he needed to get a job" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"She's retired now...He was an engineer and then he was a manger of a car firm" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"He's an electronic engineer...He's got all the sort of qualifications he needs...He doesn't seem to ever have missed sort of having a degree...he's like me, he likes to know things for the sake of knowing things. Not being educated for an ulterior motive. So I think when he retires he'll go off and do an Open University course" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

These findings highlighted that parental occupations per se do not necessarily determine the students' chosen occupations as most of the students' parents were in occupations classified as either white collar clerical, skilled manual, semi-skilled or unskilled. Whilst that is true, social mobility tends to be about status of a strata, short-range and not too far away from the parental occupation status group (Ball, 1993). Other factors need to be examined, therefore, such as social networks as these types



of capital as well as others such as financial capital embodied in family income, may have an important role in influencing students' choices to continue their education.

### 11.1.3 Family Income

The interviewer asked the students "how would you describe your families incomes then when you were growing up?" The aim was to obtain information in relation to how family income may have affected the students educational and life experiences. Four of the students stated that their families lived on low income levels. The text highlighted in bold format represents the interviewers questions and are used throughout when considered appropriate. The students commented,

"Like scrape by I'd say.

**I: Did you ever feel you went without things?**

I don't think we ever went without things but we were always taught to appreciate what we had and that money doesn't grow on trees...we never had everything we wanted but I know that if my mom and dad had enough money we would have had it but we got by with what we had" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20years).

"My father's had that job for twenty, twenty-five years and it was a good job. He was well paid but you see what would happen was all the money that he'd get or most of the money he would get he'd send back home to his parents for them and so as a result we wouldn't have much money and we weren't really, we had everything we needed but not as good as it could have been" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"Skint. As I said we were bought up on a budget...If I wanted anything I knew virtually not to ask because my mom didn't have it, and the only time I ever asked for anything is if I really wanted it...I didn't want to pressure her. It wasn't an issue. If you didn't have you were still talked to" (Access Route G, BA Secondary. Female, 25-29 yrs).

"Not very good, not very high. The impression I get is that we were quite a poor family, we never sort of had the things the other kids had and mom had to get us second hand clothes which we hated and that sort of thing. But at the same time we've never sort of really wanted for anything we actually needed which just perhaps didn't have the toys that the others had and we had clothes they were just weren't perhaps new or the trendy one's" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Thus two of the four students did not enter higher education until they were mature students and thus likely to be self-sufficient and/or independent. Three students considered their family income whilst growing up to have been 'comfortable'. However, the students were still aware that the family income was limited and they could not have everything they wanted. For example, these students stated,

"Well mom...she was always like good old housewife, always at home, so it was dad that was bringing it all in...money wasn't particularly much of a problem. We were comfortable" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, female, <20 yrs).



“Not bad just comfortable.

**I: So did you feel that you had what you generally needed?**

Yes...never been spoilt but always had what you know, to an extent what I needed for school and everything” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Comfortable yes. I was always aware I couldn’t have everything I wanted. I was always aware we had to think about money but I never went without things...They never wanted me to go without, it was a question of well if you have piano lessons you can’t have tennis lessons and you know, that sort of thing. So I think it was quite a good way to grow up actually. You learn the value of money without being desperate for it” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Only two out of nine interview students felt that their family income whilst growing up was good. One student stated how her father was on a good wage, with the other student putting it down to financial management by her parents.

“He was like manager which was still a working class manager, were still working class, for a working class person it was very good for the time because he was bringing home what a good wage would be today.

**I: So you always felt comfortable then?**

Yes. And being an only child” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs)

“They both had quite low paid jobs but they were absolutely amazing financial managing. We went on a foreign holiday every year” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The students’ came from backgrounds that were either considered as ‘good’, ‘comfortable’, or poor. The students had no other characteristics that were the same when considering their family’s incomes. No student commented directly on how their family income affected their choices to continue their education. From the discussion with the students, however, it became evident that the parents of the students had worked all or most of their lives, and had provided ‘stable’ backgrounds for their children, providing varying degrees of cultural capital. In all probability, this may have had implications on the students’ attitudes towards work, and their determination to do well and work hard to get there. The fact the parents worked hard, therefore, may have had an influence on the students’ work ethics.

#### 11.1.4 Family views on Higher Education

The views of the students’ families in relation to higher education were considered an important factor for this study when examining the choices students’ made to continue their education, particularly to enter higher education. The students came from families who held a mixture of beliefs in relation to education and in particular



continuing education post-school age. Two students commented that their parents had no knowledge of the education system, and commented,

“They just didn’t have a clue, they didn’t know how to support me...I don’t think anybody else in the family even did A levels...they didn’t have much sort of input with what was going on in education at the time, all they knew about education is what we were telling them” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“They didn’t really know about the education system...If they had been more aware of the education system that would have had a big impact. They would have encouraged me rather than coming back from school and play football every evening, I would have got some work done...I never had that at all because they didn’t understand the education system” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

Five students (5 of 9) regarded their parents to have been supportive of their educational choices, though support was shown through different methods. Three students regarded the support they received from their parents as being quite direct, that is, being aware that their parents’ supported the continuation and importance of education. These three students all entered higher education aged twenty years old or below, with no mature students experiencing such direct support from their parents via relational-social capital in relation to their educational pathways. The students who received direct support commented,

“As I say it was always very supportive...But I wouldn’t have known at the time because they’ve not been pushy parents. I think you notice if you’ve had particularly pushy parents, mine have just been supportive so I think you notice now going back how important it is” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I think I always knew that they would like me to go to university, as I said there was no pressure on me to go but I know it would have made them happy...mom said she wanted me to experience university life and everything” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, 21-24 yrs)

“I wouldn’t say they’ve pushed us into anything that we weren’t capable of...I’ve been encouraged but not pushed. But we had extra starts in life...my mom taught us to read before we went to school...so she tried to help us whatever way she could and that probably gave us a head start when we got there, it really helped” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The remaining two students, however, were both mature students. The first student commented that her parents were surprised as she was the first one in her family to continue with her education, though they were supportive of her choices.

“No I didn’t know where anything would lead to. I think they were as surprised as I was when I said I’m going to university...they’re very proud of what I’ve done because I’m the only one who has gone so far and they’re very encouraging” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).



The second student stated that her parents were supportive and pleased with her educational choices though were not involved in helping her make those choices. However, the second quote (Access Route H) is an example of cultural capital, in that she recognises the impact her parents had on her educational choices, and how other attitudes may have affected her choices to go in different directions. She commented,

“I think had they had another attitude it would have had a lot of impact, had they been pushy I would have rebelled because that was what I did. Had they been disinterested I might not of realised the value of it. Had they been discouraging...I may very well have gone...I think the way they did it was very good actually” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Two mature students stated that their parents were not ‘supportive’ of their educational choices though they were expected to continue onto university. The first student commented that having no direct support from her family was due to their lack of knowledge of the system. Her family additionally had wanted her to enter university at a younger age and did not seem supportive of her choice to be a mature student. The other student (Access Route E) commented that her father saw continuing education as ‘just like something you went and did’, though her mother was ‘unsupportive’ of her choice to be come a teacher.

“But they didn’t help me much with it themselves because they didn’t know much about what I was studying, left me to my own devices so I always felt alone...So I just felt like I had nowhere to turn...always felt like I’d let them down...Like now they might say don’t you regret not doing it back then when we wanted you to do. I say no actually I don’t I’ve got no regrets about it at all. I’m happy now” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Don’t think my dad really thought about it, it was just like something you went and did...and my moms just got this thing that she hates teachers and I’ve no idea why” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The comments highlight that there were significant differences in parental support between the mature students and those who entered the university aged twenty years or below. The mature students were less likely to have received direct support for their educational development, particularly into higher education, and were more likely to have felt they were a disappointment to their parents. Those students who entered the university aged twenty years or below, however, had direct support from their families in terms of positive support and advice and help with their studies. The students’ comments reflected parental support of education, though not directly towards the teaching profession. Parental value of education in most instances provided the appropriate students with, to varying degrees, cultural capital through



which the students developed a positive assumption of the nature and role of education in their lives. Though some of the students considered their decision to enter higher education purely of their own making, the cultural capital and social capital available to them had a significant influence on their choices.

The students who participated in the access route interviews came from a mixture of socio-economic backgrounds, not only in terms of family income but also in relation to parental education levels and parental occupations. Cultural capital was evident in one of the student's recognition of the importance of their socio-economic backgrounds in relation to their future career path (Access Route I, section 11.1) Cultural capital was also evident amongst the three traditional students who felt that their families were very supportive of their education and had provided positive advice and support and assistance with their learning. However, cultural capital as help was not as evident as would have been expected, with the majority of the students' families having little educational experience or knowledge to pass onto their children.

Though it may be argued that the students' backgrounds could have significantly affected their choices to continue their education and enter a career, this may be a presumption on the part of the researcher as only two students recognised the association between family and education and career choices. However, the assumption that individuals are always aware of why they make choices is questionable. As Hodgkinson & Sparkes (1997) argued, people make choices that are influenced by their personal dispositions and social, economic and cultural contexts. Most of the students who participated in the interviews did not recognise a direct association between the degrees of cultural capital and social capital available to them, though their educational choices and pathways, to varying degrees, could be taken as 'givens'.

## **11.2 Schooling Experiences**

The students' schooling experiences was the second major variable identified in Yang's (1998) model of adult participation in education. Two indicators of schooling experience were identified by Yang (1998), these being: percentile rank in class; high school grade. These indicators were not appropriate to the data collection aims of this



study and were, therefore, not adopted. Instead more qualitative indicators such as type of secondary school attended and qualifications gained, influence of peers, and advice from careers guidance, were used to assess the degree to which educational experiences had influenced the students' decisions to continue their education into higher education.

### 11.2.1 Type of Secondary School

The type of educational institution and educational achievements and qualifications of the students' pre-university were examined in the access route interviews to examine the possible impact educational achievement may have on students' educational choices and pathways into higher education. The interviewer began by asking the students what type of secondary school they had attended.

Six students attended state secondary schools and did not present any information of any significant impact their schools had on their education. Students' perspectives, for example, were reflected in the following statement,

"It was just a normal...a normal state secondary sort of mixed, chaotic" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The six students who had attended state schools (comprehensive) were a mixture of mature students and those who entered the university aged twenty years or below. The remaining three students, however, had attended a girls school and all three of these students had entered the university as mature students. Two of the students commented on how their school had affected their education.

"It was a girls school...I think they said at the time it was like sixty percent Asian...They wanted to send their girls to a single sex school and not mix them with boys...I think you could count the amount of black girls on your hand...they said if you haven't got a foreign language you can't enter university or something and they made you do a foreign language compulsory. And if you don't do it your mother has to come into school. So my mom said if the teacher said you have to do it you have to do it" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"It was state, an all girls state school...When I was sort of eleven I did one of those IQ tests and the school rang up my parents and said why isn't she at a private school, you should be pushing this girl but I never got pushed...I never actually knew how to work, how to learn. So nobody ever thought I might actually need some learning skills because I was just bright, bright, bright" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



The first comment (Access Route G) highlights how the school was geared towards the students continuing their education as far as higher education, highlighting significant degrees of institutional capital. The student, for example, was made to take a foreign language so that she could enter university. In comparison, however, the second comment (Access Route H) reflects an experience of poor learning skills due to a lack of institutional capital, despite the student being considered 'bright'. This is an example of unstructured educational potential that was unused and subsequently lost. Only two students (2 of 9) considered their schooling experiences to have been directly relevant to their educational pathways. Though this does not necessarily mean that the schooling was not relevant, their experiences generally led the interviewer to downgrade the significance of their secondary schooling.

### 11.2.2 Qualifications Gained

The access sample was asked about qualifications they gained whilst at school. This question was posed in such a way as to examine any possible perceived link between educational achievement and those students who continued with their education straight from school compared to those students who had some time away and re-entered education as mature students.

All but one of the students (Access Route F) left school with four or more GCSE or O levels at grade C or above. The students' quotes below represent their comments in relation to their qualifications gained at school.

"I got ten GCSE's and three A levels...I got four B's, four C's and 2 D's" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I think it was, I think it's ten altogether. One A, six B's, and three D's" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I got one A, two B's, the rest C's, trying to think, I did nine altogether so six C's" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"At the time eight O levels and a CSE grade one at the time which was equivalent to an O level" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"It was the first year of comprehensive in education in Dudley in what had been a secondary modern" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I got seven O' levels. It is actually called sixteen plus, you know where you sit one exam and you get two certificates, one O level and one CSE so I got seven...Chemistry, and Biology, Maths, English Lit, English Language, History, and Physics...French" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).



“Handful of O levels...I took nine or ten and really didn’t live up to expectations...I got an A for music, and I took maths a year early and got a B for that and then I got B’s for two English’s and then I think I got physics and computer studies and history, something like that” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I got eight A’s and one C. And A levels I got an A, a B and two C’s.

I: What did you do your A levels in?

R: The A was English Language, the B was Latin, and the C’s” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The student who followed Access Route F (BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs) into higher education was the only student to leave school with no qualifications. The student answer the question be merely stating,

“No. None at all” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

All but one of the students, therefore, left school with significant educational achievements, obtaining four or more GCSE/O levels. The educational abilities of the students were evident at school age with only one student achieving no qualifications. These findings imply that educational achievement during school age cannot be used on its own to predict why some students decide to continue their education as mature students and do not continue with their education straight from school. However, though only two students considered their schooling experiences to have had a direct influence on their educational pathways, most of the students left school with qualifications. The students’ achievements at school, could have set benchmarks and expectations of potential that remained with the students and was reactivated at different stages if life, i.e. later in life for the mature students compared to those students who continued their education from school.

### **11.2.3 Influence of Friends on Decision to Continue/Leave Education**

The role of friends and peers were examined in the access route interviews to review any possible relationships on the students’ educational choices and pathways through degrees of social capital. The interviewer asked the interviews ‘how influential do you think your friends were on your decision to continue your education?’ One student (Access Route B) did not provide an answer.

The majority of the access route interview sample (6 of 9) stated that their friends were influential on their decision to enter higher education. Five of these students



referred to school friends, and one student referred to a family friend. The students commented,

"I think they were quite influential...it was the ongoing process you know, you did your GCSE's, you did your A levels and then you went onto university. So yes friends were influential because that was the thing, you used to get to sixth-form and decide what A levels you were doing and what university you were going to go and do and that sort of thing" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"Pretty influential because all my friends were pretty bright you see and their parents automatically expected them to go to university. But my view was on it if I get there I get there, I won't get my hopes up that I'm going to get there, I'll wait until I get my results see what happens. But I always wanted to go.

**I: But you feel they had quite a big affect on your decision?**

Yes they did because I thought I know they'll all go, I know they'll all get there grades so I've just got to work that bit harder than them and get there as well" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The students who perceived their friends to be influential on their educational pathways discussed issues such as 'expectation' to continue their education. Continuing was regarded as the done thing and an 'ongoing process' (i.e. school sixth-form, university). Students who discussed such issues had entered the university aged twenty years or below straight from school/college. Higher education was regarded by some of the students as a 'natural progression', exemplifying degrees of cultural capital and social capital as the choice to continue their education was available to them.

"It was just a natural progression. I supposed subconsciously there might have been because they stayed on. I mean one or two of them did leave at the time and they went off to different colleges and things but no I just thought well they're expecting me to go to uni. If I'd have dare turned round to my parents and said look I don't want to stop because it was considered to be bummed out if you left at sixteen. Especially because of the attitude of that school at the time...Just carried on. I just didn't like it. I was doing something that I didn't want to do" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"That family friend, he was a big influence but apart from that at school nobody really influenced me as such...And my own decision.

**I: So who made you re-take your English and Maths or was that your own decision?**

I took them myself yes. Nobody advised me at college as well. I thought I'd better do something" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"Oh there was never any doubt I'd go to college. I mean the options at sixteen weren't that great in those days. It was YTS or McDonalds or college and it never occurred to me that I wouldn't I guess. Plus having an older brother that had done it.

**I: And did all your friends carry on as well?**

R: Pretty much yes. In fact yes I think all of them did" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



The other three students, however, had entered the university as mature students and commented on the influence of a family friend and individual choice, and limited options available at that age. One student commented, however, that going to college was a 'natural progression' (Access Route D). The student commented how family expectations (cultural capital) had made her continue her education into college though she was 'doing something that I didn't want to do' (Access Route D). One student commented on the influence of a family friend on his decision to continue his education. The third student commented on a lack of alternatives. All three of the mature students quoted above, therefore, provided examples of cultural and social capital, either through the role modelling obtained through a family friend, or the realisation that education was a 'natural progression'. However, the mature students did not specify that expectation existed to continue as far as university, only as far as college. In comparison, however, the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university had expectations of fulfilling the 'ongoing process', i.e. from school to university.

Two students did not consider their friends to have been influential on their decision to continue their education. One of these students was a mature student and one was aged twenty years or below on entry to the university. The students' comments were,

"They might have been influential in the way that they were going to do this and I'd think well I'm not going to do that. I went the opposite way. They all wanted to go into banking. I'm thinking well that's like not something to look forward to for the rest of your life is it" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"Not really. Like I said we were such a wide range of people sort of from quite a lot of different backgrounds and sort of different expectations of what they wanted out of life" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The two students who did not consider their friends to be influential raised issues such as not wanting to be like your friends due to different interests and expectations. These two students seemed to be directed by their own goals rather than their friends' expectations and goals. This is an example of how peers can have a positive or negative influence on choice, resulting in either agreeing with their intentions and choosing this direction too, or disagreeing with their goals and choosing alternatives.



### 11.2.4 Careers Guidance at School

The students who participated in the access route interviews were asked about the extent to which degree careers advice received prior to entering higher education had influenced their decision to continue with their education and to enter higher education. Only one student (1 of 9) found careers advice to have helped them decide to continue their education and guide them towards their chosen career, highlighting a significant lack of institutional capital through educational advice and support amongst the interview student sample. This student stated,

“There was some in the fifth year I think and then again in the sixth form as well...I mean they helped me to decide to be a teacher and they were the people that directed me into the right books to find out what universities are for what and helped me look at prospectuses and that sort of thing. So yes they were very good actually” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

One student stated that her career and educational choices were completely her own.

“I’d already decided what I wanted to do so it was only a fact of knowing where I could go eventually...I made the decision, looked into what courses they were doing...I was quite happy with what I’d chose in the end” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The remaining seven students had all experienced negative and poor advice from careers advisers, and recognised the lack of positive influences and how these experiences had impacted their educational choices and pathways. The students commented,

“It wasn’t very good because they told me basically that they weren’t very sure whether I was actually going to pass my A levels and then they said because I’ve never done PE in GCSE or A level, that was because the school didn’t offer that as a subject, there’d be no choice of me getting into a university to do it...But I took no notice of the careers advice. And I managed it on to the P.E. course” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Really bad...it made me decide that I was going to do my own thing” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Well the carpentry teacher was the careers adviser...at the time because I didn’t like many of the things I did at the school I really, really nagged and nagged and nagged until I got to do Engineering and Engineering drawing...I said look what I’m really, really interested in...is being an architect or a surveyor and electronics is quite new I might be interested in that. I’d like to give it a go and it’s like a girl asking for stuff like that. Never heard anything else, you know, that was it...So that sums it up. This was like 1978, ‘79” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).



“At school we did but it wasn’t good...I wasn’t told about, really told about the consequences of failing my GCSE’s or passing them and you know what I could do. We weren’t really encouraged to work hard, maybe we were but we just didn’t see it at the time...we weren’t told about the importance of passing English, Maths, and my Science especially...Especially in the Asian culture and I mean the lack of information from my parents I felt was a big implication. They didn’t know anything about the system...if there’s a contact between the teachers and the parents maybe via an interpreter or an open evening where interpreters are hired out or brought in and they can communicate and maybe encourage their kids to go to work harder” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I went for my careers interview and I said I wanted to be I think it was a production engineer at the time and he said you didn’t get a very good grade for that I don’t think you’ve got the capability to do that. Is there any kind of other engineering at a lower scale that you fancied doing? And those were the words, blatantly honest with me...I came out thinking she doesn’t think I’m that intelligent but I know I am, I knew I was...so she knocked me down a bit but not a lot. But it’s stayed with me” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“We had one of those computer tests when you have to fill in and answer loads of questions...I knew I did not want to be a teacher, I knew I did not want to work for a bank and I did not want to work for an office. They told me I was going to do all three and that really upset me but I’m still not an office person or a teaching person” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“We always had career interviews every so many months especially in the last sort of couple of years. Don’t know how useful it was because I sort of don’t really remember it much...So it really wasn’t that useful” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The qualitative data obtained through the access route interviews supported the data obtained from the questionnaire survey, where only 4.8% (n=13) of the questionnaire sample was influenced by careers advice. The majority of the students from the access route interviews found their experiences of career advice to be inadequate and negative. Many students felt that they were not encouraged or supported by their careers adviser or provided with adequate information and choices. Only a few students said that the careers advice they received helped them make a career decision, though no student considered careers advice to be the main influence on their educational choices and pathways.

### 11.3 Attitudes Towards Education

Yang (1998) defined attitude a “mental tendency that is expressed by evaluating organised education activity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (p.233). The indicators used by Yang (1998) under the variable attitude towards education were: educational aspiration, i.e. level of education planned to attain; importance of having an education in life. The attitudes of family, friends, partner, and children were used as indicators of attitudes towards education to understand the availability of cultural



and relational-social capital and how these in turn affected the educational experiences and plans of the students prior to entering higher education. Educational goals and ambitions were discussed as the second indicator in relation to life goals and in particular career ambitions. These indicators were considered important in evaluating the impact of attitudes on the students' decisions to continue their education into higher education.

### **11.3.1 Family's Attitudes Towards Education**

The students who participated in the access route interviews were asked how influential their families were on their decisions to enter higher education. It was considered important to examine the influence parental and sibling attitudes had on students' decisions to enter higher education.

Two students (2 of 9) commented how their parents were not influential on their decision to continue their education as they had little knowledge of the education system, particularly higher education, and therefore lacked human capital and did not have a predisposition or opinion on education.

"I think our problem was that mom and dad came from the sort of background that you left school at sixteen with whatever, if you even got a qualification you went straight into a job. So they still don't understand how important it is to get your GCSE's to move onto A levels... Luckily I was the sort of person that I wanted to go on to A levels. They didn't know how to encourage me because I'm the oldest so it was the first for them... I mean I did it for myself because I know they wouldn't have been bothered either way" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"My parents they don't know much about the education system and this is the problem I've come up with in the college as well where I was teaching. A lot of Asian parents don't understand the education system, they can't speak English and so they don't understand what education is but they know that there's the university and you know if your son or daughter graduates from there then it's a good thing... We haven't been forced to work and I think the financial aspect comes into it, we haven't been told to pay rent or pay for anything and we've always been given financial support and that makes it much easier to go into education" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

Three students regarded their families as very encouraging of their educational choices, by recognising the value of education and wanting their children to do well, thus displaying degrees of relational-social capital. They commented,

"My parents have always been very supportive of my education. My parents aren't particularly educated themselves, they never went any further than high school and they both work. They encouraged us and now both me and my brother are at university... I think we've always had their encouragement. My attitudes from home have always been very encouraging" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



“Very encouraging but not pushy. When I should have gone at eighteen everyone just assumed I’d go...I don’t think my parents ever said you will it was just like well you’re a bright girl, you’ve done your A levels, you’ll go to university. And then when I didn’t go they were like okay so you’ve found yourself a job, fine. They’re both educated people...so they know the value of education. They trust my intelligence to get on with it basically. They were really pleased when I said I was coming back to university” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“My parents sort of hold education as something really, really important. Neither of them had any higher education...I think they feel that quite keenly that they wanted us to go somewhere in life and get the best education we could so they encouraged us a lot at school and were really supportive. They’d help us academically if they could, like taking us to the library and things...I think they thought I could so they pushed me a little bit and said just do what you want but you know make sure you fulfil your potential. So yes I think that encouraged me really” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Two students also considered their families to have been supportive in their educational pathways but also specified how the decision to continue their education was ultimately their own.

“Yes, they wanted me to but obviously it was up to my decision what I wanted to do. Whatever I decided they wouldn’t have minded but they were pleased I had chosen it and they supported me...I had no pressure really because neither of them had gone. It was no pressure whatsoever so if I went I went, if I didn’t it wouldn’t really make any difference” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs)

“I was brought up in a single family...the attitude towards learning was very relaxed...But she never pushed me or anything. Nobody pushed me...It was my decision...They didn’t say finish school you have to go out earning. No-one did that at all” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The remaining students from the access route interview sample commented that their families were not supportive of their choice to continue their education. One student felt a lack of interest at a younger age and one student recognised a lack of support for studying at a mature age. Both students highlighted how their families were supportive of education in ‘abstract’ though not in practice, through encouragement though lacking any interest in their educational experiences and eventual choices.

“When I was younger it was the in thing for my family because they expected the ultimate expectations of continuing. Now that I’m an oldie as they put it I should be out doing this that and the other. What you doing that for? You’ve got enough on your plate without wanting to study...They were going mad at me when I didn’t do it before and I went out to work and now I’m back and I’m doing it” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“When I was younger I don’t think my parents had given it a great deal of thought other than we didn’t get to go to university so we think you should and that’s about it...I’ve no idea why they wanted me to go. And no interest in what I was doing...No idea what I wanted to do...it was always as if they expected me to go to university just as a matter of course but didn’t really push me or encourage me or take any interest in anything I did” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).



The findings have highlighted the differences between family expectations and support in relation to higher education. Half of the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university from the access route interviews stated that their families were very encouraging, thus providing social capital to varying degrees. Four of the mature students (4 of 5) highlighted that their parents had expected them to continue with their education when they left school or college though this had little impact on their actual choices. One of the mature students commented that when she returned to education her parents were not supportive and did not understand why she had returned at a later age, presumably because parents had an image of a student being one aged twenty years or below on entry. One mature student (Access Route F) came from a minority ethnic group and commented that his family did not understand the education system, thus lacking human capital, and so had been unable to provide advice or information, although they were aware of the value of education and had supported him financially throughout his studies, thereby providing financial capital.

### **11.3.2 The Attitudes of Friends Towards Education**

The attitudes of friends were discussed with the students who participated in the access route interviews in relation to the degree to which their attitudes had an impact on the students' choices to continue their education into higher education.

Most of the students' (8 of 9) had friends who favoured education and planned to continue their education as far as college and even university or had already entered university. The pro-educational opinions of friends provided some of the students with degrees of social capital that geared them towards education. Not all of the students, however, were affected directly by their friends' attitudes. The students commented,

"I would say about ninety-five percent of us fifth years went onto sixth-form at the school...it was more or less the done thing...The only people I can think of who didn't go to university were those who took a year out to go travelling or to get a job or something, earn some extra money before...the school was very encouraging, they wanted you to do as much as you could...it was my friends and the school really that encouraged me to, to go on and do greater things" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"Quite a few of my friends went to college but there's only the odd few who went to university" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female. <20 yrs).



“Funnily enough one of my best friends from school always wanted to be a teacher too so she’s gone to teacher training college as well and all of my friends wanted to go onto higher education to really experience the university life...I suppose it put a bit of pressure on you because you didn’t want to be the one who was going to stay at home and not experience things so I suppose you worked hard because you wanted to go with everyone and everything” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“All my friends were, I’d say ninety five percent of them were pro-degree, continuing” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“I think why I came to university was when I left school I had a friend...and he was doing a degree and I always wanted to go to university and do a degree. So because I saw him working and he was doing computers that’s why I went into computers initially...I didn’t want a dead end job, wanted to get somewhere” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“They were a big influence when I was at secondary school. The friends I was with, all in the top set as well, all worked really hard...it was a work ethic, five years...it was all work and trying to work harder. So they had a big influence” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“When I was eighteen most people I knew were going to go on to university because I sort of hung around with a crowd of people that were bright...But I think it was then that I knew it really wasn’t worth my parents paying for me to go to university, it was like it wasn’t going to happen” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I think all of them stayed on to A levels but a lot of them just wanted to go and do something as soon as they’d finished rather than go to university. A few of them went to university so it was quite varied really” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Only one student from the access route interviews stated that the attitudes of friends had no significant impact on her choices. Instead it was the experiences of school that had a negative impact. From the quote below it is evident that the negative schooling also affected other students as few pupils from that school continued their education.

“Compulsory education in my experience was awful, I wouldn’t wish it on anybody... if there was a dozen that went on to do A levels after that experience that was it...The fact the school was so bad affected my choices, it was dreadful and it still upsets me now sometimes when I think about it. It was such a horrible experience. There were things I could have done” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Thus, most (8 of 9) of the students felt that their friends’ attitudes were pro-education and had a significant impact on their decision to continue their education and enter higher education. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university, students during or just after the massive expansion of higher education, commented on issues such as higher education being the ‘done thing’ and how not going to university would have resulted in a feeling of missing out on something. Two of the students suggested that they entered university purely of their own choice whilst one mature student, who had negative educational experiences prior to university, found



her boss to be the most significant influence. One mature student stated that they entered higher education due to the direct influence of a family friend. These findings highlight that higher education was the 'next step' for the traditional students, though for the mature students, those who had influenced them differed according to circumstances. These comments also signify that the students had, to varying degrees, available cultural capital through cultural expectations, cultural norms, and relational-social capital through influential peers and role models.

### 11.3.3 Partners Attitude Towards Education

The students who participated in the access route interviews were asked to discuss the attitudes and influence their partner (if applicable) had on their educational choices and experiences. Those students who had partners whilst studying commented,

"He's been quite encouraging...I can understand why people don't have boyfriends while they're at university because they've got to be very giving because you're doing a lot of homework all the time" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"Fine. He's great. He loves it. Most of our friends, a high percentage of our friends they're well educated...but they've done it and they've been there so he has a lot of respect for people with education. So he's very supportive with that and he said if you want to continue no problem, we plan, you continue" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"He's really positive, really encouraging, always helped and he's provided loads of computer support for half the Business School I think...he's got some Business school experience as well so that helps" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"We met at college and he was as thick as two short planks and he admits that...everybody told him he was thick as two planks, don't even bother going to college, get a job. And he was determined to teach...and he really had to work hard. He did a BTEC...went to university and then did his degree...he really, really worked hard. Very, very determined" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"He thinks it's a shame he missed university because he thinks the lifestyle sounds wonderful but...I don't think he holds education in too high esteem...So we're sort of opposites really...I think he sort of accepts that you know to do the job I want to do I've got to be in university and that's what I've done. I mean he met me when I was at university so you know I suppose he's just accepted it" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female <20 yrs)

The majority of students who had partners whilst studying at the university (4 of 5) stated that their partners attitudes towards education were very encouraging and, therefore, positive. Only one of the students (Access Route I) had a partner who did not hold education in great esteem. Over half (3 of 5) of the students' partners' were educated themselves or were studying at the same time. The quotes signify that



partners that were pro-education and provided a great deal of support for their partner of which was valued and relied upon.

#### **11.3.4 Attitudes Towards Education of Children**

The access route interviews asked the students how their children (if applicable) viewed education, and particularly higher education. Those students with children (n=2) were aware of how their education affected their own attitudes towards their children's learning, and commented,

"I hope it doesn't put him off because I can see myself doing my mother job and saying this is the progression, this is what you're going to go...Even though it hasn't always been my way of thinking I know I'm going to be a little bit stern with education...Telling him the beauty of having an education...I mean he's nine and I'm still doing that with him" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"We want him to try hard but if he tries hard and comes home with a poor work mark, fine, as long as he can say to us I tried hard and that's what we want" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Those students with dependent children found that they wanted their children to do well academically and to value education. The students seemed to favour education though one student seemed to focus more on her child's efforts rather than the grades achieved. This appears to be a good example of generational change in the available cultural capital and social capital of the students, from support provided with knowledge becoming support based on knowledge and experience. The knowledge and experiences gained by the students will, in turn, be passed onto the next generation through cultural, social and human capital and influence their educational choices and pathways.

#### **11.3.5 Educational and Career Ambitions**

In order to understand why the students had chosen to enter higher education, it was considered important to discuss their previous and current educational and career goals and ambitions. This was in order to examine the students' opinions with regards to the importance of having a good education in life. When asked the students' opinions of a good education centred around two main themes, vocation and proving one's own capabilities. Three students commented that they had undertaken their degree on the basis that they needed it to teach. Comments included,



“All the time it was more or less linked into going onto university and going on to do teaching although I didn’t know exactly what I was going to do probably until sort of I’d started my A levels...It was one thing after another, okay you finish your GCSE’s, we can go on and do A levels...and what about the course you’re going to do at university after A levels, so the school was very much like that, but then all of us were and none of us particularly regretted the school so” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“My educational ambition was purely and simply to get a B.Ed to teach” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I want obviously to become a teacher. I want to, I don’t know whether I’ll stay in it for the rest of my life...I’ll experience it for myself and then make my own decisions” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The remaining students (5 of 9) stated that they were studying for individual reasons such as proving to themselves that they were capable, individual determination to be educated, and a pure interest in the subject. These issues were highlighted in the following comments.

“I think it’s for me to take, I’m taking it a step at a time and I want it to be a natural progression. I would like to progress through. I just see it like you’ve got year one, year two, year three and it works it’s way through and I would like to continue with Masters, Doctorate obviously finances permitting...I’m on the ladder so I might as well do it because I’d never forgive myself if not” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs)

“Well I’m hoping that by having a degree it’ll sort of put a line through all my bad education...it also proves that I’m capable of not just practical nursery type stuff, that I am actually capable of not academic thought but more analytical type skills” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I think when I wanted to come to university I wanted a degree at the end of the day. I wasn’t too concerned about what kind of job I get I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do something in life, get a degree and after that I wasn’t really too concerned about what career I go into. I just wanted a degree to fall back on” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“If I get a two-two I’ll be chuffed and if I get a third I’m going to be gutted, absolutely gutted about getting a third” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“It’s quite nice I’ve got that TESOL qualification now, I’ve got some music qualifications which is nice to have but actually waving my degree in front of somebody’s nose saying, hey look and employ me, no” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I do enjoy learning new things especially if they interest me, if you gave me a course that I enjoy I could do it...with languages and things I could imagine myself if I have time when I am teaching trying to learn things alongside it” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The students educational and career ambitions varied between the ‘next step’ from A levels to a degree, achieving the qualification as a means to an end, i.e. teaching, a desire to prove to themselves and to others what they could achieve, and a pure



interest in learning. Most of the (3 of 4) students who entered the university aged twenty years or below, however, seemed to have studied to qualify for a career compared to all of the mature students who either wanted to prove their abilities or study out of interest and individual achievement. All of the students' comments highlight the variety of reasons why students entered higher education, whether instrumental or to 'learn for it's own sake'.

#### **11.4 Self-evaluation**

Yang (1998) defined self-evaluation as 'personality characteristics' and used two variables: attitudes towards education and self-evaluation. This study found the variable of self-evaluation important in understanding the students' predispositions and attitudes towards education. This study adapted the variable of self-evaluation to suit the aims of the study and created six indicators these being: personal expectations and ambitions when younger; current personal expectations and ambitions; significant influences on life educational choices; relationship between education and life goals; goals whilst at university; and personal impact of educational experiences and choices. Each of these six indicators shall be discussed.

##### **11.4.1 Personal Expectations and Ambitions When Younger**

The interviewer asked the students what their personal expectations were when they were younger. This question was used to gain an insight into the educational and career expectations and opportunities that the students' felt were available to them whilst they were younger.

Four students specified that their personal expectations were to become a teacher, and that their career plans had remained constant and focused. These students made comments such as,

"I always wanted to be a teacher. Isn't that sad. I remember when I was younger...when I was about four years old and my friends used to come round and we used to play schools and you know I remember saying at such a young age, I'm going to be a teacher and even when it got to like GCSE, I'm going to be a teacher...I've been saying it for years...Haven't put it off" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I had different things on the way, you know once I wanted to be a physiotherapist, you know just things on the way but it's mainly been teaching all the way through" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



"From very young I wanted to be a nurse...Then it changed, I did like teaching I loved school, loved it, so I'm not surprised I wanted to go into teaching" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"I just expected to be a teacher. I think it was for all the bad experiences at school that one Geography teacher was such a positive experience and I did love the subject and he always seemed to be having such a good time...I like being with people, communicating with people" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Two students stated that they wanted to follow quite different career paths whilst they were younger, and so their expectations did not centre around becoming a teacher.

The students commented,

"I don't know maybe like everyone they want to become a doctor or they want to become a policeman or they want to become a fireman, just those normal expectations like a kid has. And if anything I wanted to become a doctor maybe" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"Well I wanted to be a vet nurse and that was it, wanted to work with animals, thought that would be fun. Think I probably would have enjoyed it but I don't think things like money wouldn't have been as good as I'm going to earn. Perhaps it would have been a bit boring after a while" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

Educational success was an issue for two students, one of which wanted to work hard for what she achieved and another who had a lot of respect for educational achievements. Both students held education in high esteem and wanted to achieve.

"I wanted to, I always wanted to come away to university. From, I've always wanted to be a teacher and mom used to try and put me off it saying you don't want to work with children, you don't want to work with children and, but I've always wanted to become a teacher and come away to university. I've always enjoyed school and wanted to work hard to achieve what I wanted to achieve really" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I wanted to respect the people I knew. I mean I knew a couple at the time and I used to put them, people who had the doctorate when I was at that age or doing it I had them really on a pedestal. I used to think yes good they've worked their way through it, that's great. There's nothing you'd trade that in for. Nothing in the world" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

One student specified that she did not have any clear direction and personal expectations of her life and that whilst growing up she was aware that she did not know what career she wanted to pursue. She commented,

"When I was much younger I was going to be a concert pianist...But then if I ever thought about a career it was always sort of the forces, it was the Air Force to the police...I was very aware as a teenager that I hadn't really got a clue what I wanted to do. You know when you meet somebody who knows they want to be a nurse. There's nothing more annoying than meeting people who have a vocation because you are so aware that you don't have one" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



The students thus provided four main responses as to what their personal expectations were when they were younger. These four main themes were to teach, to learn and achieve, to follow a different career path than teaching, and a lack of direction. The four main types of responses were provided by both mature and students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university. The students' comments reflect the range of expectations individuals have and highlight that students' 'pathways' into higher education are by no means predictable and clearly definable for the students themselves.

#### 11.4.2 Current Personal Expectations and Ambitions

The students were asked about their personal expectations in relation to their career goals and future paths. Comments referred to their roles as becoming teachers and their own personal, non-career related ambitions. The different students commented,

"I always wanted to be a teacher...I wanted to be a teacher since I was about four and I'm still doing it...I think teaching is going to be what I expect it to be because of course it's one of those sort of studies I've had to go into schools I've had to teach there, I've got a good grasp of what it's going to be like" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"Well if I wasn't thinking about money I've always said I don't really ever want to come out of the classroom. I've got no sort of ambition to be a head teacher or anything. I think perhaps that will change as I get older because of money but my ambitions as it stands at the moment is purely and simply to teach" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I always wanted to come away to university. I've always wanted to be a teacher and mom used to try and put me off it saying you don't want to work with children...I've always enjoyed school and wanted to work hard to achieve what I wanted to achieve" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"I'm taking it a step at a time and I want it to be a natural progression... I would like to continue with Masters, Doctorate, obviously finances permitting. But even if it's not immediate I would make sure I had work and got the money to do it. I'm on the ladder so I might as well do it because I'd never forgive myself if not" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

"I just expected to be a teacher. I think it was for all the bad experiences at school that one Geography teacher was such a positive...I knew I wanted to work with people. I like being with people, communicating with people" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I just want to finish this degree. I don't tend to think too far in the future...I don't think it would be very wise of me to embark on an MPhil at the moment, I think my brain needs a rest...I have quite a lot of confidence in my ability to teach which is nice...And also my just general willingness to do almost anything has always carried me through" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).



One mature student felt that her age would be a negative factor on her chances of obtaining a decent wage in the future.

“I don’t ever expect to be earning as much because I’m a mature student... I think that is going to be really negative in the eyes of the employers, I don’t think they’re prepared. They’re going to look at the short-term, they’re not going to look at the long-term and here’s somebody they’re going to train who’s got at least if not more than twenty years work left in them whereas I mean most research shows that young people don’t stay in jobs and more mature employees are more likely to stay...I’m quite interested in careers advising, that kind of thing” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs)

Two students commented that their future goals included having a family and having a steady job, not necessarily a career and not necessarily teaching.

“I want to get married and I want to have some kids. I like kids...Career I just want a steady job, not too difficult, not too stressful and just enough money to come in to get by...I want to do something like maybe my own business in maybe a plumber or a carpenter or something. Want to work around my own schedule” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

“I loved school, loved it, so I’m not surprised I wanted to go into teaching... I don’t know whether I want a job or a career. I haven’t made my mind up...I happen to be quite a family person. I love being a mom, I love being a partner and I don’t really want to interfere with work on that...If I have a job and I’m quite happy to be a Maths teacher maybe it would be better within the teaching role to maybe one day be head of department. I could incorporate kids with that. If I want to further it, maybe like teach teachers, I don’t know whether I can juggle a family...Pretty undecided” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I just want to finish this degree. I don’t tend to think too far in the future...I don’t think it would be very wise of me to embark on an MPhil at the moment, I think my brain needs a rest...I have quite a lot of confidence in my ability to teach which is nice...And also my just general willingness to do almost anything has always carried me through” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Though all of the students’ were studying on education and mostly teacher training courses, their future goals and ambitions were not simplistic. Students’ commented on either becoming teachers, continuing their education to postgraduate level, or changing direction completely and focusing on personal ambitions such as other careers or having a family. Studying to become a teacher or studying an educational course was not, therefore, a clear predictor of the students’ future lives.

#### **11.4.3 Significant Influences on Life Educational Choices**

The students who participated in the access route interviews were asked about any significant influences on the educational choices they had made throughout their lives. The students’ responses centred round issues such as personal determination and ambition, personal interest and a lack of ‘choices’.



Four students (4 of 9) stated that the significant influence on their educational and life choices has been their own personal determination and ambition. Three of these students were aged twenty or below on entry to the university and one was a mature student. The students' quotes are provided below.

"I suppose there's been some sort of determination because I've always wanted to do teaching at such a young age...But that's been it, I don't know any teachers and like it's only one or two out of my year that actually went on to do teaching because there wasn't many of us really.

**I: So has it all been mainly through personal ambition?**

Yes, yes" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"I don't think there have been really because I think if you don't know what you're going to do you're going to have influences but I've been sort of so set in my ways about what I wanted to do...I've just done what I wanted to do" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"Probably my own self motivation...trying to prove the careers adviser wrong as well...proving the people who told me I was going to get those grades wrong. And also making my mom and dad proud I suppose in one way and making something better of myself" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"I think it all seems to have come from me. I'm very glad I was sensible enough not to do university at eighteen. I'm very glad I always was just bloody minded enough to say if I want to go I'll go and not sort of stop and think I'm too old. I was a bit apprehensive about being older than the others but it certainly didn't put me off...There's a good old mix of people and I can get on with eighteen year olds anyway" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

One mature student stated that she had entered university due to the respect she has for education and the people who have achieved and worked their way through the education system. She commented that,

"People I've met that are educated. And people I've met that aren't and have succeeded. So I see the pluses of both sides of life...I like the respect people get, probably more so or equally so from working their way through their education" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

One student stated that the significant influence on her educational choices was simply personal interest.

"It's been just personal interest, things that I've like" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

The lack of information was presented as a significant influence in one student's educational choices and pathways. A lack of information resulted in him not having the necessary information to be able to make 'informed' choices. The quote presented below is a clear example of a need for 'informed decision-making', with the student exemplifying how information can not only assist in decision-making but also present



‘choice’, though there is also an emphasis upon the information being presented to him rather than being his responsibility.

“I think the main reason is information...If I don’t know about anything then I can’t do it, so information is a big thing. If I’d known about what I need to become an optician or a doctor or something like that at school, if I had the information then maybe I’d have gone out of my way to actually try and become somebody like that and work harder” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

The following two students also focussed on choice and a lack of alternatives as the significant influence on their educational choices and ‘pathways’. They commented,

“Choices. Being told that I cannot do something, that one with...there’s not many women going into engineering made me like want to go into engineering. That was a big influence on me. Educational choices. I haven’t made many choices. I’ve gone with things I like” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I suppose family have been and a lack of alternatives, that there weren’t any good jobs available without sort of going onto further education...I would have liked to have been writing now and trying to write but it was a bit idealistic, I don’t know if I would have achieved anything...the pressures of having to have something that will bring in money and the best way to do that was go to university and get a job” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

The students stated that the significant influences on their educational ‘pathways’ were factors such as personal determination (n=4), respect for education (n=1), personal interest (n=1), and a lack of information and choice (n=3). A third of the students, therefore, felt that their choices have been restricted by lack of information, choice, and viable alternatives. These students represent an important aspect of the theoretical strand of this study, that of colonising and coping. The students in effect were reporting themselves to be examples of both, coping with restrictions and limitations imposed on them by external agencies though gaining an education and moving their lives forward in a positive and productive manner. The students had taken advantage of their situations, whether initially those situations were regarded as positive or negative.

#### **11.4.4 Relationship of Education and Life Goals**

The students were asked how they saw education in relation to their goals in life. The students provided answers that focussed on career and ambition, personal achievement, experiencing university life, and creating opportunities for them.

Three students (3 of 9) stated that their educational goals were clearly and specifically linked with their career goals. These students entered university, therefore, as a



‘means to an end’, a route through which they could achieve the necessary qualifications needed to enter their chosen career of teaching. The students stated,

“I suppose it’s played a big part, I mean if I’ve always wanted to do teaching and obviously that’s what I’m going to end up doing in a way my education’s always been geared up to it...A levels obviously was geared up for university, university’s geared up for teaching so they’re all quite inter-related” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

“At the moment it’s the most important thing, it has been for like at least the last year and for my career as well I suppose. I mean at one time although I wanted a career I was very sort of romantic about, oh, I want to get married and I want to have loads of kids but I don’t now at all. I just want to get my job and earn some money and spend it on me...I think it is a money thing as well to a certain extent, you’ve done without so much” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

“That it’s essential for me to get a job in teaching” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

The students who regarded education as a means through which they could reach their career goals entered university aged twenty years or below. One student of the same age on entry to university specified that she was interested in experiencing university life. She commented,

“I think I’d have gone away whatever. If I’d have got the grades I would have done something at university” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

Four students entered university in order to achieve and learn. These students entered university to gain personal achievement and success, and for the sake of learning. They represent, therefore, students who learn for personal satisfaction and to learn ‘for it’s own sake’. The students’ were all mature students except one. The students’ quotes are provided below.

“If I don’t use my education which I probably won’t at the end of the day...I’d just like to be able to say that I have obtained it if somebody asks, says well what degree do you have I can say what I have and I can’t have them thinking well maybe she wasn’t intelligent enough to do it because that’s far from the truth. It’s just nice to do it...you’re not studying for the love it, studying for goal orientated, that certificate at the end. It’s a pity” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Because I’m so used to it even when I do go to work I think I’ll do something...Even though I’m here I’d still like to learn French, I wouldn’t mind learning sign language. So there are little recreational educational things I still want to do.

**I: So you think you’ll always be within a learning environment?**

Yes. I will. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get away from it. I’ll be learning something even if it’s pottery” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).



“I like to feel educated. I like to know things. I like to have information, that’s just part of who I am and the more I learn the more I can connect what I know already and that’s something I find it very fascinating especially with the whole communication thing. You find everything is inter-linked and the more you find out the more you realise there’s a whole other area that you can go into if you want to. So for me education is just pretty much everything I do is an education...It doesn’t really have a whole lot to do with specifically doing a course or specifically having a goal with what I’m going to do with my education once I’ve got it” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I enjoy learning and I think it keeps your brain working and I think that’s important, makes you happy” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

One student saw education as a way of ‘opening doors’ and creating more opportunity, whilst another student saw their education as the result of a lack of opportunity and choice.

“I think because so many people still look at the pieces of paper you’ve got and add up all you’ve got, how many of this qualifications and how many of that I see it as the key to opening the door to other opportunities really. I think once...I’ve got this piece of paper that says I can do this you’ve got more people prepared to listen to what you’ve got to say.

**I: So do you feel that it gives you more status?**

I don’t think it’s really a status thing...I think one of the things is people like look and go oh you’ve done this degree quite late in life when you’ve got all these other responsibilities it means that you’re obviously committed...I think my gross salary was around £21,000 when I gave it up and I dropped that to go and live on a grant” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I’ve got a load of friends whose parents knew about the education system and who encouraged their kids and hence they’ve done something better.

**I: What do you mean by better?**

Better in the sense that something they wanted to do, something that’s interesting. Although teaching is interesting but if I had all my options open at school maybe I would have chosen something else.

**I: If you could go back to when you were at school what would you ideally do?**

What I’d ideally do is pass all my GCSE’s, work much harder, work much harder...maybe do A levels at college...in a Science related subject and then if not maybe go into teaching Science or maybe go into something like Medicine or Optometry or Pharmacy or something like that” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

The responses provided by the students represent a mixture of reasons for entering higher education, i.e. as a ‘means to an end’, for the sake of learning, or due to a lack of, or a way of creating, opportunity. All of the responses, however, are examples of degrees of choice, whether that is students making career choices, personal choices, or reacting to a perceived lack of choices.

### 11.4.5 Goals Whilst at University

The students were asked what were their goals whilst being at the university and what had been the ‘barriers’, if any, to achieving these goals. One student commented how



they wanted to become independent. University life and education was the barrier to independence. She commented,

**"I think the major goals have actually been to gain independence and to be able to just rely on myself a bit more. I mean obviously you've got the education side of it but then because I've moved away obviously one of the big things has been independence and to live by myself and you know, to grow up a bit.**

**I: What have been the major factors affecting you achieving these goals?**

I suppose it's just been the ongoing thing of university and going through the teaching practices...education is one of these things that you've got to make sure that you want to do it and a lot of people drop out when they go into schools because they don't think it's what it's going to be like" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

One student commented how her goal had been to be happy and to do the best she could, to prove some thing to herself. She recognised no barriers in achieving this goal whilst being at the university. She stated,

**"When I first got here my goal was to be happy and to do the best I could and to see if I was an A grade student which I turned out to be. My goal was never actually to get a degree, I've tried to avoid that one because if my goal was to get a degree I'd feel I had to stay until I'd finished and my one stipulation to myself when I came here was if I don't like it anymore I'll go...And now it's like I'd like to get the degree because I've got this far and because I am trying to stay in one place.**

**I: Have there been any factors that have affected you reaching those goals?**

R: Not as far as the university is concerned, no I don't think so" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The remaining students all stated that their goal whilst at the university was to compete the course. This was a common response, though not all of the students had experienced the same 'barriers' to achieving this goal or any barriers at all. The students commented,

**"Just to finish really. I'm very competitive and I want good grades so I think it's always to get good grades...I think university's just been a long hard slog...it's your last lap then isn't it before you can get some money and get a job.**

**I: So what do you think have been the major things that have affected you along the way in reaching your goals?**

The organisational factors of the university, there's been problems with that...availability of tutors and things" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

**"To pass the course, to make sure I've passed everything and to be as prepared as I can really for teaching.**

**I: What do you think have been the major factors affecting you achieving these goals?**

I wouldn't say there have been many constraints...I was just very determined and also knowing that my parents were proud of me getting here anyhow and I just wanted to prove something really" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

**"I want a minimum of a two one, I'd like to get a first but as long as I get a two one.**

**I: Have there been any factors affecting you achieving these goals?**

No not really" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).



**"To get through it and survive. I will finish it.**

**I: And what have been the major factors affecting you achieving that do you think?**

For me I've had really good support from my partner and sheer bloody mindedness...just plough through the day as best you can" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

**"Just to finish my course, that's all...when I started my final year I wasn't sure I'd make it through because we started off on my degree programme which started off with maybe fifteen and now there's only about six or seven left, they've all dropped out...I just wanted to finish the course**

**I: So how do you think you've achieved those goals?**

Just hard work and determination I think. And I've taken a lot of, acted upon a lot of constructive criticism which I think you definitely need to do in this degree. From my tutor, from my mentor at school...I've proved something to a lot of people. That's what gave me a real boost. That's what I wanted to do, finish the course and prove people wrong.

**I: Has there been anything that's made it difficult for you to finish the course?**

I think a lot of people dropping out, that's made it very difficult...how are you going to do it if they've dropped out" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

**"To get through it. To pass...It is to get through the last three years. I haven't got time to redo anything...I've had to work hard to be able to progress to next year.**

**I: And what have been the things that have affected you getting through it?**

Time...I think the computer side of it is the next thing...Time and travel. Even if I decide I'll come in on a Saturday that's twenty minutes here and twenty minutes back which is precious to somebody who hasn't got that much time" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

**"To get good grades and pass. But along the way I must say I've sort of made good friends and you know learnt a lot socially like I said about my confidence and everything. But they weren't things I set out to achieve, they were really nice by products.**

**I: So what do you think have been the major factors affecting you achieving these goals?**

I think some things like the lack of books have affected them badly sort of perhaps stopped me from achieving. And the fact that your social life does take over especially at first, everything is so new, going out and everything...essays do tend to get done later, lectures get missed and that sort of thing. I think that I came to university and I did intend to sort of work hard and achieve and achieve and achieve then you get here and it's like can't be bothered now" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

The students whose main goal since being at the university was to complete and pass the course produced a series of 'barriers' that they felt had affected them reaching this goal. These barriers were all university based, such as university organisation, lack of books, and more personal aspects of studying such as available time to study and travel, university social life, and experiencing students dropping out of the course. All of these factors have impinged on the learning process of the students. At the same time, they are also factors that the students themselves consider they cannot directly change. The students, therefore, have had to 'cope' with these situations and become colonisers within the established parameters of choice.



### 11.4.6 Personal Impact of Educational Experiences and Choices

The access route students were asked about the extent to which they felt that the university and their educational experiences had changed them in any way. The majority of the students (7 of 9) considered that they had developed as a person and grown in confidence. The terms ‘growing up’, being ‘independent’, and learning about living, represent how the university experience had affected these students. All of the students aged twenty years old or below on entry to the university had experienced a positive change in themselves since coming to university. The students’ quotes are presented below.

“I’ve grown an awful lot more confident about everything and obviously I’ve grown far more independent. The funny thing is I always think I haven’t learnt anything from coming to university, anything educational until I start to speak...to people who aren’t education based, who aren’t RE based and they ask me these questions...I see blank faces and I think what have I done and of course they don’t understand it because I’m speaking in jargon to them...I thought oh I have learnt something, you know, oh I feel really intelligent now, I can waffle on about this, that and the other. So yes I feel like I have gained quite a bit but I don’t think you really realise it until you’re in more of like an outside situation away from it all...I mean obviously the education side of it has made me develop and hopefully formed me into this wonderful teacher that I’m going to be” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

“I think experiences over the four years have changed me but I don’t know if it’s all to do with being here...I think you can confuse it with growing up really can’t you. I don’t think anything particular that happened while I’ve been here has influenced me that much...I still work the same way, I still leave everything until the last minute...Obviously my career has, I’ve improved as a teacher through my teaching practices but I don’t think there’s been any major changes to me as such” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

“Probably made me more, believe in myself and believe if you want something bad enough that I think you can reach it, and that’s it really” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

“Yes. More positive. Feel better in myself and I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. It’s there. Bit sore I had to take the year out but I’ve overcome it” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Yes made me even more laid back than I was before...Everything’s disorganised, nobody knows what’s going on and everybody sort of like fumbling through life and thinking well it’s alright, I can cope with this, I’ve coped with it before...All these problems I’m not going to allow to get on top of me anymore because it’s just a fact of life they’re there wherever you are” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I think that it has developed me as a person...given me confidence and determination and now I feel because I’ve completed this course I can do whatever I want in life now...Whereas before if I wanted to do something you know I’d think twice about it thinking can I really do it and now I think if I put my mind to it I can do whatever I want. I think that’s not just the case for my degree, I think anybody doing a degree would probably feel that after they’ve done a degree (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).



“Made me a better person. Definitely changed me...Having a child has influenced my education because I won’t sit there. I haven’t had the time to sit there and be confused...I will put my hand up, I’d be one of the ones who say I don’t understand what’s going on would you explain it again. I don’t care about looking stupid. I want to be able to walk out of that class and say yes I can go home and do my homework. And I haven’t got the time to mess about like a twenty year old might have. The fact that I’m also black has lot to do with it. I’ve had a lot of positive discrimination on my way...But if they’re going to give me a break I’m going to prove to them that I deserve it. I’d like to think they’re giving me the chance and I would like to prove that they were right...But I don’t know whether that’s to do with age as well. I like being a mature student” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“Yes lots of ways...I’ve learnt about living and all the different experiences, living with different people, learning to tolerate people, learning to handle your money, learning to cope with bills, finding out what life’s like in the real world, having to go into a work situation like on teaching practice and get on with people, knowing what it’s like not to be able to afford to buy things. It’s been very broad really and most of it hasn’t really actually been to do with the academic side. I think what I’ve learnt most is life experience.

**I: Do you feel that the academic side has changed you in any way or provided you with anything?**

A little bit. I’m a lot bossier. Actually perhaps that’s been an aspect of making me more organised in my work I would think being on teaching practice because you have to be organised...So perhaps it has from that point of view” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

One students experienced a change in relation to the skills she had gained in an educational sense, and felt that she was now employable.

“Only in the ways you’d expect I guess. Just silly things like computers, I now know what I’m doing with a computer and that is going to have an affect on my life, for the rest of my life as far as I can see and it sort of makes me wonder what would have happened had I not come back because I would have been a very, very long way behind anybody else...I’m sort of more employable now almost even without wanting to be because I have certain skills...I’m sure I wasn’t this screwed up before I got here but then I think staying in the same place for three years had made me realise exactly what I’ve been doing with my life for the last ten...I think I would have changed a lot in three whole years whatever I’ve been doing so I’ve been here for three years and therefore I have changed a lot, it’s all the experiences, it’s everything” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The students’ statements represented a common experience of higher education affecting the students in a positive manner. The students felt not only that they were qualified and ‘employable’ but that they had learnt about life, had experienced life situations and daily independence, and felt confident and ‘grown up’. The higher education experience, therefore, could be regarded as a ‘transitional phase’ through which the students not only gain an education but develop their personal qualities too, most particularly for the students who entered university at a young age and were experiencing independence for the first time. Independence was not only experienced in terms of living arrangements, but also in terms of managing money, time, workload, entering situation such as teaching practices. The quotes highlight how the



students regarded their education and in particular their higher education experience as extremely beneficial to them in both educational and personal terms.

## 11.5 Participation in Adult Education

The final variable used by Yang (1998) is adult participation in education, and was defined as “adults’ attendance behaviour in education activity” (p.254). Yang (1998) used two indicators, being credit adult education (i.e. academic qualifications) and non-credit adult education (i.e. training, non-academic courses, personal enrichment). To suit the aims of this study, these indicators were modified. The indicators used within the interviews, therefore, were: time away from education; access route into higher education; type of post-school educational institution; courses studied; work experiences; and influential factors on decision to enter higher education.

### 11.5.1 Time Away From Education

The access route interviews enabled an insight into either how long the students had away from education or for what reasons the students continued their education straight from school/college. The students were asked to explain why they followed a particular educational route into higher education. The students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university stated,

“I got in to university straight after A levels, because I was toying with the idea of taking a year out...I mean in the end I thought well, I’m here, I might as well keep on going on, especially while I’ve sort of got the enthusiasm for it...I’m still moving forward rather than stopping, standing still, might as well carry on. So that was the main reason really” (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“Just because it’s always what I’ve wanted to do. I’ve always wanted to teach and I’ve got to come...I think it’s purely and simply because you’ve got to have your B.Ed to be a teacher. If it was any other job where they’d say well we prefer you to have it but you know you might get the job anyway I don’t think I’d have come. I think I needed the push that you know, you’ve got to have it” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I thought if I had a break I didn’t know what I was going to do in that break and basically I was just very motivated to come away to university. I really wanted to come away. I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted to do more at the time” (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

“I didn’t want to go to university I was quite a home body and I was very scared about the whole idea of it. I think it’s been a great thing for me...I didn’t sort of fancy just going to university for the sake of it which is why I did something that gives you a qualification at the end that you can use” (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).



The mature students who had time away from education stated,

“Rebellion. I wanted to work. Money. The good life appealed to me. I was convinced that I couldn’t really do without it...So to me it was a different world and I was all feeling good in myself but my parents were saying you’ll regret it. You’re going to regret it” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Just couldn’t. Got no focus and didn’t know what I wanted to do... I thought I’m going to have to go to university to do a Special Needs Teaching degree which I thought oh start all over again and it was at that point they started to do those advertisements for nursing for learning disabilities and I didn’t realise I could get into it from that way. And I applied and that’s how I did it” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“I wasn’t going to go into teaching. I was going into sound engineering...I know it was a big step with my son at home and that’s why I decided to do A levels and not a BTEC or an equivalent sort of thing. So I don’t know. It all just kind of drifted away” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“I wasn’t interested enough in studying and I didn’t know what I wanted to do but I was sensible enough to see what a waste going to university would have been...I always said to my parents, definitely to myself, that if and when I’m ready to go to university I will go and I can remember saying that at eighteen, it was like when I want to go I’ll go...It was no major decision really. I’ve always felt with being in England you can do any sort of education you want to at any stage and it doesn’t matter how old you are and it doesn’t matter what experience you’ve got or qualifications and that is a very nice feeling of freedom. So that’s something I’ve always felt” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The students aged 20 years or below on entry to the university saw entering higher education as the next step in their educational pathway. They were very aware that they wanted to become teachers and that to be qualified they had to obtain a degree qualification. Their decision to enter higher education was uncomplicated and had definite direction. However, the mature students who had time away from education had decided not to continue their education at a younger age as the result of many different influences, such as earning money, lack of focus or career goals, and not interested in education. The mature students, therefore, made, to varying degrees of awareness, conscious decisions not to enter higher education at a time in their lives even when their families expected them to continue their education.

### 11.5.2 Why Follow Particular Access Route

The students who entered higher education aged twenty years or below and participated in the access route interviews were asked why they chose to continue their education straight from school. The students provided a mixture of responses, such as the ‘next step’. They needed to continue or else wouldn’t have returned to



education, or an ambition to go to university, and a lack of alternative choices. The students' quotes are provided below.

"I thought well you know, I'm here, I might as well keep on going on, especially while I've sort of got the enthusiasm for it, because I thought well what happens if I take a year out and then I think I can't be bothered doing that, so I might as well while I'm still sort of still moving forward rather than stopping, standing still, might as well carry on. So that was the main reason really" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"Just because it's always what I've wanted to do...I've always wanted to teach and I've got to come...I think it's purely and simply because you've got to have your B.Ed to be a teacher. If it was any other job where they'd say well we prefer you to have it but you know you might get the job anyway I don't think I'd have come.

**I: So why did you decide to carry on straight away from school?**

Because I wouldn't have come back...I think if I'd have actually started a job like I like my Saturday job, if I'd have started that full-time I'd have never come back. Although you're taking a massive cut in wages and you know in status so to speak, you know your A levels and whatever would have been wasted, I think if I'd have done that I wouldn't have ever, ever come back" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"Basically because I thought if I had a break I didn't know what I was going to do in that break and basically I was just very motivated to come away to university. I really wanted to come away. I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do more at the time" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

"Nothing really presented itself, didn't find anything else. I did sort of find one job that I went to the interview for...but they were looking for someone who would sort of be willing to definitely stay for at least five years and to be honest I didn't know if it was a career I wanted to go into...So I didn't take that opportunity. Don't think it would have been me.

**I: So why did you not continue your education straight from A levels?**

Well like I say because I hadn't intended to at first, I'd intended to do a different sort of education and then I applied too late, couldn't get what I wanted so that was why.

**I: Were there any other influential factors on that decision?**

Just that I didn't want to go to university I was quite a home body and I was very sort of scared about the whole idea of it...I think it's been a great thing for me. Socially I think I have sort of gained in confidence. I really didn't fancy leaving home. And as well I didn't sort of fancy just going to university for the sake of it which is why I did something that gives you a qualification at the end that you can use" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

The mature students from the access route interview sample were asked why they did not continue their education straight from school and had a break in between their previous education and higher education. The mature students provided a mixture of responses, such as wanting 'the good life', lacking direction and motivation, and unexpected circumstance. The students' commented,



“Rebellion. I wanted to work. Money. The good life appealed to me. I was convinced that I couldn’t really do without it. I had friends who were like doing their degrees at the time and they working in this restaurant earning money there and they were having a really hard time with money and everything else and I was earning some money and was able to go and eat in that restaurant, I was like eighteen thinking this is great... So to me it was a different world and I was all feeling good in myself but my parents were going you’ll regret it. You’re going to regret it” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

“Just couldn’t. Got no focus and didn’t know what I wanted to do but at the time I was working in, I’d got a Saturday job...a guy used to come in with four people with learning disabilities, adults, and they used to go upstairs to the toy department and nobody would go up with them. And I used to go up and I really enjoyed it and spend half an hour, an hour with them in the toy department and thought oh this is something I could do, I quite like this. And then I thought oh god I’m going to have to go to university to do a Special Needs Teaching degree which I thought oh start all over again and it was at that point they started to do those advertisements for nursing for learning disabilities and I didn’t realise I could get into it from that way. And I applied and that’s how I did it” (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

“Because I wasn’t interested enough in studying and I didn’t know what I wanted to do but I was sensible enough to see what a waste going to university would have been...I didn’t really want to go to study subjects which I obviously wasn’t interested in...I always said to myself and I always said to my parents...when I’m ready to go to university I will go and I can remember saying that at eighteen...then when I sort of found myself with a bit of gap, what shall I do now, I’ll go to Uni., it was a really easy step for me to take. It was no major decision really.

**I: So you felt you could do it at any age when you wanted to do it?**

Yes completely. I think that’s partly to do with my attitude, if I want to do it I’ll do it...I’ve always felt with being in England you can do any sort of education you want to at any stage and it doesn’t matter how old you are and it doesn’t matter what experience you’ve got or qualifications and that is a very nice feeling of freedom. So that’s something I’ve always felt” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

“It was the plan and then because I got pregnant it wasn’t...I wasn’t going to go into teaching. I was going into sound engineering...I know it was a big step with my son at home and that’s why I decided to do A levels and not a BTEC or an equivalent sort of thing...It all just kind of drifting away.

**I: More circumstance than anything?**

Yes” (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Both the students aged twenty years or below on entry to university and the mature students presented a variety of reasons for their continuation or break away from education. The responses highlight the lack of predictive behaviour of students from different age groups, though the responses also highlights that education was always an option for the students as they are aware, at least post-hoc, of why they chose an alternative route. If education was not an option for them, the ability to make a choice to continue or to have a break from education would not have been apparent to them. This represents the degree to which the students had, to various degrees, positive educational cultural capital, that being the option to continue their education and gain capital that would be beneficial to them throughout their lives.



### 11.5.3 Type of Post-School Educational Institution

The interviewer asked the students what qualifications they had achieved. The students had all achieved qualifications, though to different levels and in different educational environments. Those students who entered the university aged twenty years or below, for example, had followed the 'traditional' route into higher education, that being achieving A levels. The quote from the student who represented Access Route A shall be used as an example.

**I: What course did you study and achieved then? A levels in...?**

A levels in English Literature, Sociology and Home Economics.

**I: And what grades did you get?**

I got, what did I get, a D for English, and E for Sociology and a D for Home Ec"  
(Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

Student from Access Route D attended an access course. However, two students left their previous educational institutions with no or little qualifications at all and this left them feeling negative and disappointed. They stated,

"I did nine O levels at school and I came out with one...Came out of school feeling stupid with absolutely no confidence, completely demoralised but went to college and did five new O levels in nine months passed them all...I thought well obviously I'm not thick...then I went to tech to do my A levels...went to do geography A level which I really, really wanted to do...oh sorry we're cancelling it. So I never got to do the one thing I really wanted to do...so I ended up messing around for the two years I was there...So at the end of that experience I just didn't care, wasn't interested.

**I: So did you actually finished your A levels?**

I think I turned up for twenty minutes for my Law exam.

**I: So did you get any grades for them?**

No".

"When I left school I went straight to college. When I left school I had absolutely no GCSE's, I left with zero GCSE's.

**I: Did you just not take the exams or...?**

I did take the exams but I didn't know what the implications were of failing my GCSE's...my parents didn't know much about the education system, in fact they knew nothing and so they wouldn't really encourage me to work because they think I'd been working hard at school and whatever. They didn't know you had to do a set amount of homework, you have to revise for exams, you have to do course work...But when I actually got my results then it hit me that I've done something wrong here...I was just not motivated to work.

**I: So what did you do at college then?**

R: Well when I started at college I started a BTEC first Diploma, that's a new GNVQ Intermediate.

**I: And what was that in?**

Business. Alongside that I was doing my English GCSE and then from there I did a GNVQ Advanced and my Maths GCSE. And a AS level in Computers as well.

**I: And you did all of those in two years?**

In three years...passed them all...I got C's.

**I: And that after college you came straight to university?**

Yes went to UCE for a year" (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs)



Both of the students quoted above had achieved few qualifications, particularly whilst at school, and this was due to external factors and not ability. Schooling and family experiences and dispositions towards education affected their level of involvement and achievement, whatever their self-perceptions were.

#### 11.5.4 Work Experiences

Work experience was considered important to understand the skills and experiences the students were bringing into higher education and how these, if at all, affect their choices and experiences whilst at the university.

The students who had entered university aged twenty years or below had experienced employment during vacations from study and in weekend jobs. The following three quotes represent the themes that have come out from the students' discussions of their work experiences.

**“Yes I’ve done summer jobs. I used to work at a shoe shop...I used to work there as a Saturday girl about a year and a half, over my A levels and then I went back occasionally sort of like over the holidays for extra work..I had some really horrible jobs, I worked as a tea lady for a week in a factory up here and that was temporary, did some other sort of factory warehouse work for a couple of days and then I’ve been working at a department store recently over Christmas and Easter just gone, and that was a department store back home. So it was all sort of, that was a sales assistant job (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).**

**“I: So you work in a chemist on a Saturday?**

**Yes.**

**I: Have you had any other work experience besides that? How long have you been working there?**

**About a year and, about a year and four months.**

**I: Have you had any other work experience besides that?**

**I worked in a petrol station for some of my time in my first year when I was here. I’ve worked in a shop while I was at college...I’ve worked fitting and packing blinds, window blinds, I’ve done different things so.**

**I: Do you tend to work during your summer vacations?**

**I haven’t had a summer job...I thought it’s my holiday and I didn’t want to” (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).**

**“Just the waitressing in the year out and a bit of cleaning but that was quite casual it was like can you come in this Saturday and do some cleaning.**

**I: So what work experience have you had during your four years?**

**The cleaning’s continued. I’ve done factory work the first summer. The second summer...I was in a flour mill...bagging flour. Worked at Gulliver’s Kingdom which is a big theme park for children**

**I: So do you think these work experiences have provided you with anything?**

**Yes definitely it’s been a real experience you know, part of life. It makes you glad to get back to university and it makes you think teaching’s not that bad because at least the days go quick. I mean the factory it’s like looking at your watch every ten minutes and it’s terrible.**

**I: What was the main reason you had to work during the summer?**



Just money. I needed the money...I saved to bring back. My parents supported me during the summer sort of you know, no rent, no food bills so it was just to pay off when I got back" (Access Route I, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 years).

The students' experiences within employment were in unskilled, low paid, part-time positions, the type of work that may be popular amongst the student population. In comparison, the mature students had brought to university a wealth of experience within careers that were both professional and skilled. The mature students stated,

"Well on from the nursing I've done managing residential care for Social Services" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

"I've done loads of jobs actually in the summer and part-time. I used to work at a petrol station as a shop attendant and I worked in a take-away doing deliveries.

**I: Is this all since you've been here or when you were to college?**

Both. Both yes.

**I: Have you worked since you've been here?**

Since I've been here don't think so no.

**I: Why did you choose to not work part-time since you've been here?**

Don't know just, I've always been encouraged to work from home, I've done odd jobs here and there maybe for a week or two through an agency but I haven't actually had a constant part-time job (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

"Recruitment and review but that's still clerical. That was brilliant...I learnt how to interview people which comes in very handy" (Access Route G, BA Secondary, Female, 25-29 yrs).

"I worked for a finance house in London as basically a debt collector. I was closing down small businesses by the time I left...I've done bits of English teaching. Worked on a farm.

**I: Where have you done English teaching?**

In Thailand a little bit, very, very freelance and I did a little bit in Holland because I was working with some refugees who were staying at the youth hostel and we were all sort of learning Dutch together and I was helping them with English so it was just that sort of thing. I've done the whole youth hostel thing so cooking, cleaning, bar work, and all that sort of thing. I've done voice overs in Thailand for English language cassettes. I've sold jungle treks in North Thailand. Odds and ends you know. Anything that sort of turned up really" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

The occupations that the students acquired were varied, and were appropriate for the students' positions and situations in life at the time of employment. The mature students were more likely to have had experiences of a career, though the students who entered the university aged twenty years or below were more likely to have worked in more manual employment that they did not consider as a long-term option. Work for them was, therefore, purely undertaken on financial grounds. These quotes none the less reflect the skills and vast experience that mature students bring with them to university, and skills that they may continue to use after graduating.



### 11.5.6 Influential Factors on Decision to Enter Higher Education

It was considered important to understand which significant influences, if any, had an impact on the students' 'choices' to enter higher education. A third (3 of 9) of the sample commented how their decision to enter higher education was influenced by their ambition to teach. Two of the students were aged twenty years or below on entry to the university with one being a mature student. They stated,

"I suppose the main thing was when I was actually sort of toying with the idea of teaching I realised that obviously if I had to be a teacher I had to go on and do a degree...so it was more just carry on line with the teaching" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female <20 yrs).

"I knew what I wanted to do. I think that makes all the difference if you know what you want to do" (Access Route B, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"When I was working I was classed as a secretary and everybody said what do you do for a living, I'm a secretary but I would have loved to have been a teacher. I did that for two years...in my heart of hearts I wanted to be a teacher...and that was it. In this job, didn't like it, stop making excuses, go back and

The issue of meetings parents expectations and making them proud arose in one students comments, as though she felt she had no pressure to enter higher education from her family, she was aware that her parents would be proud of her if she did continue with her education. She commented,

"I suppose one factor which I haven't said before was mom and dad always would have liked my brother to have gone to university and I just thought, I was doing it for myself and I was under no pressure, but I always knew if I did go away it would make them proud." (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

One student entered higher education to achieve a change in direction, a 'new route'. The student was a mature student and was aware of how her educational choices would influence her son, and she wanted to be a good 'example' to him. She wanted to become aware of the education system to not only influence her son's education but to understand more about how the education system works. Another student also wanted a change in direction but more so as a way of achieving and proving to herself and others that she was academically capable. The students stated,

"I wanted a new route for me and I did want it to influence my son because I thought well if I want him to do it I've got to set the example and I want to get a bit more about how the education system works now because I've been out of it that long and school procedures are totally different now...I don't want to be ignorant which is why I chose Education Studies as well because I wanted to know a little bit more about what was going on" (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).



“I like to think that if by any fluke I’d actually got the grades for university I still wouldn’t have gone...I certainly had no interest in representing myself as a person who could only get two D’s at A level. That wasn’t me that was just what I had and the thought of going through clearing and trying to persuade people to take me on. I didn’t like to be represented by those qualifications so I thought right forget it” (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

Some of the students commented that the main influence on their decision to continue or return to education was their ambition to teach. It could be presumed that all of the students who enter teacher training courses or education courses enter on the basis of career choices. However, though this is important this study has shown how the students enter the university for other reasons, such as individual achievement, being a role model for your children, and making people around you, particularly family, proud.

### 11.6 Summary

Yang’s (1998) model was found to be appropriate for the intentions of this research. However, due to the model originally being a statistical model, concepts of ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ capital were not directly recognised though the themes of the model allowed simple adaptation to suit the aims of this study. Yang’s (1998) model of adult participation in education provided a sound basis on which to develop further a framework for the qualitative interviews that would allow the examination the students’ perceptions of higher education before entry and their subsequent experiences whilst studying (discussed in chapters 6-10), and the degrees of cultural capital that influence educational choices and participation.

The access route interviews highlighted varying degrees of cultural and social capital that ‘influenced’ the students’ choices and educational pathways. The students commented, to varying degrees, on factors such as positive schooling, pro-educational attitudes of friends, and the importance of role models that influenced their decisions to continue their education into higher education, thus being direct forms of cultural capital and relational-social capital. However, the degree to which the students were aware of their cultural environments was minimal in some instances, such as the impact of family on their educational choices. Most of the students felt that their family had no influence on their decision to continue their education. Issues such as family work ethics, the lack of pressure to enter the workforce straight from school, and providing the students with a degree of choice rather than ‘telling’ them they were



going to university, are all 'indirect' forms of cultural capital and social capital. Due to the students' career ambitions, however, being directly linked to their educational choices in most instances, i.e. teaching, the students' choices were not dependent on social and cultural capital, but were made from a variety of positions. The students' choices to enter university, therefore, were influenced by varying degrees of social and cultural capital alongside career and personal ambitions. The interviews, therefore, enabled the study to gain an insight into the affects of cultural and social capital on the educational pathways and choices of Education students at the university.



## Chapter 12: Conclusions

The aim of this research was to understand and theorise the contextual factors, experiences, decision-making processes and careers of students within higher education coming from a variety of social positions and backgrounds. The study also sought to contribute to the theory of students' 'pathways' into, and experiences of, higher education, as research in this area is somewhat limited. The conclusions shall be drawn from an analysis of the inter-relations between the findings of the study and the theoretical perspective.

From the theoretical framework developed for the study (page 63) the debate surrounding the relationship between agency and structure is one of the most fundamental of social phenomena and has implications not only for analysis but also for action by institutions. The emphasis in this research and thesis has been upon the subjective understanding and reflection of motive, experiences and behaviour by students studying Education within one university.

The students' social and structural positions were considered by the students to have varying degrees of influence on their experiences within higher education. Social and structural positions included social class, gender, ethnic group, age, and disability. None of the students in the sample categorised themselves as disabled. Consequently, this thesis does not include or consider this aspect.

Whilst there were difficulties in both eliciting social class origins and obtaining accurate accounts of it, a number of students in the questionnaire sample said that they came from lower working-class families (20 of 194). Notwithstanding some generalisation, the working class students in the main considered that they did not come from families in which educational progression was expected of them. Their families, though supportive in the abstract of education and of the decision of the students to continue their education into higher education, had little knowledge or involvement in the education system. From the focus groups and interviews, it was clear that the students' understanding of social mobility via higher education was not a conscious understanding in relation to their social class position, but more so



mediated through their career ambitions. By entering higher education and obtaining the necessary qualifications, the students were able to move into their initial career choice that in most cases was the teaching profession. This supports the argument put forward by Ball (1993) that higher education may be used as a means of social mobility as well as a confirmation of a social position.

The majority of the three samples were female, studying primary education, and entered the university aged twenty years or below (80 of 169). This finding too reinforces literature already available within this area, which is that the majority of those who enter the teaching profession, and particularly primary teaching, are young females. (Coffey & Acker, 1991) At the same time, the high number of the male students entering the university as mature students compared to the female students was significant for the majority of the male students in the samples entered higher education as mature students (35 of 51). There were no other significant differences found in this research between the male and female students found in this study.

Ethnic identification was also an area in which there was a dominant group, that being White European. There were only a few students from minority ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the students did not discuss the impact their ethnic group had on their entry into or their experiences of higher education, implying that it was insignificant for them because of a White European dominance in British society both numerically and culturally.

One Asian student believed that his ethnicity did have had a significant impact on his educational experiences because of a parental lack of understanding of the educational system and their lack of encouragement. Whilst this attitude and experience mirrors the self-designated White Working Class students (see below), and thus may have a common working class experiential base to them, the research did not pursue this line of research because of low sample numbers of ethnic students. For the ethnic student concerned, entering higher education was primarily due to the influence of a family friend, a finding that is certainly in line with research that demonstrates the importance of significant others and patronage in educational achievement (Reid 1998). The student commented,



“My parents, they don’t know much about the education system and this is the problem I’ve come up with in the college as well where I was teaching. A lot of Asian parents don’t understand the education system, they can’t speak English and so they don’t understand what education is but they know that there’s the university and you know if your son or daughter graduates from there then it’s a good thing” (Access Route F, BA Secondary, Male, 21-24 yrs).

Noting the smallness of the sample, it is possible to suggest that ethnicity was a background factor in this case, but more so in relation to a lack of cultural capital that was common to the whole working class students as well. The immediate cultural environment of the home in which the student lived lacked the knowledge and the experience of the education system to pass on through generations. Additional cases were not found due to the low number of minority ethnic students in the sample.

Differences existed between those students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university and the mature students in relation to the factors attached to their social and structural positions. This is not to say that at a particular age it is predictable which responsibilities life holds, but rather that within the samples, age had a clear and direct association with other significant factors. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university, for example, saw themselves as having had responsibility for themselves only, and suggested that they based their choices on their own interests, goals, and perceived opportunities and constraints. In comparison, however, the mature students based their choices not only on their own preferences, but also took account of a number of additional factors such as family responsibilities and dependents.

The significance of age and associated social and structural positions was perhaps highlighted most significantly in the students’ decisions to either remain at home to study or to move away from home to study. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university were divided by whether they remained at home to study or moved away from home to study. The students who remained at home whilst studying focused primarily on their academic goals whilst at university. These students, however, considered that they had missed out to a certain degree on the experiences of university life, more specifically the social experiences of university. Those students who had moved away from home focused on their academic interests but also on their image of being a ‘real’ student in higher education. The image of



being a 'real' student involved moving away from home, being independent for the first time, and enjoying the social life that studying in higher education offered.

In comparison, the mature students focused not on the social side of higher education, but on the expected educational requirements of their courses and how they were going to manage their lives whilst studying. The mature students' decision to enter the university was influenced by the course and being able to study locally. Such study patterns did not disrupt their family lives, particularly for those students who had dependent children. By way of example, two mature students highlighted how they considered themselves to have entered higher education for academic reasons and were aware of the non-traditional role they would occupy as a student within higher education. The students said,

"I knew it would be different for me than it would be for students coming straight from school. Because like us all with family commitments and work commitments I knew it was always going to be different for us than the others" (Respondent 3, B.Ed Secondary, Male, 30-34 yrs).

"I'm just going to be there to work and go home and that's it...it was just like, well I'm going there to work and that's it. I'm not going there to actually socialise and party and whatever so" (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

These and the other mature students usually had plural and competing social roles, i.e. student, partner, parent, employee, all with a variety of divergent needs and interests. The impact that such social roles and identities had on the students' choices and decision-making processes whilst in higher education was significant, in that the students had to 'juggle' a range of conflicting positions and responsibilities whilst making a decision. The concept of 'juggling' was used by the student's as an appropriate description of their decision-making process within higher education. In the context of this thesis, 'juggling' involves maximising opportunities within the constraints placed upon them by their familial positions and social responsibilities, including educational, institutional responsibilities (Blaxter et al, 1997). The students presented an image of attempting to keep all the areas of their lives circulating in co-ordination with one another. Students felt that by 'juggling' the variety of social roles they held, and the responsibilities each of these social roles possessed, they could manage. The concept of 'juggling' can be highlighted through comments made by two of the mature students interviewees.



“I have to miss some things. Can I miss work or how important is it I go to that? Am I going to lose my job? You just have to weigh it up... You just have to juggle. No other word for it really... I’ve had to spend less time on actual work and I could have done better but I haven’t had the time. It’s just one of those things” (Respondent 5, Combined Studies, Female, 50< yrs).

“I must confess I had to take sickies for dissertation week which I shouldn’t really, but you know, I couldn’t do anything about it, it’s got to be done. You think well what’s more important. Well obviously the jobs important because if you haven’t got a job how am I going to pay for that, but then if I don’t get this done then I’ve failed my degree, or perhaps not fail but not get a good mark as I expected to get. So you just have to decide what’s more important at that particular time” (Respondent 3, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

The students, at the same time, valued each of their social roles as important to their lives, and did not signify a preference of one social role over another. This resulted in the students having to sometimes ‘compromise’ their preferred choice of action and adopt a course of action that would allow as many of the needs attached to their social roles to be met, a form of means-end analysis and decision-making. This was highlighted by one student who chose modules due to the day and the time of day of the lecture due to having dependent children.

“There’s a couple of evening one’s which sometimes would have been okay but at the moment because they’re the evenings my husbands working as well and then picking children up it’s not very good. And another one is I’d have to be coming in for four days which means four days childcare because you’re charged for the full day regardless of whether you’re coming for half a day” (Access Route D, Combined Studies, Female, 30-34 yrs).

The students thus made decisions and ‘choices’ that would accommodate as best they could to all of their social roles, including that of being a student. That is, students made decisions that resulted in both internal and external needs being met to an acceptable or optimum level (as far as they could judge). The students also based their decisions not only on meeting defined internal and external needs, but also upon the perspectives, attitudes and values that they held as mediated social and cultural capital.

The majority of students’ considered that the decision to enter higher education was their own. Whilst technically true, for they have to complete the application forms, most of students’ too came from families that supported their choice to enter higher education. The family thus provided the students with a variety of support as well as a backcloth of cultural capital, defined in the sense as the attitudes, values, and beliefs held as a result of socialisation and other learning processes (formal and informal).



A few mature students, however, recognised the lack of support from their families. Many of the students commented that their parents were not aware of what higher education involved, but knew that it was 'good' in the abstract to get a degree. These students, therefore, felt a degree of security in that education was accepted as a worthwhile goal and 'good' within their home environment and that their choice to pursue their educational goals was supported, though perhaps not initiated, by their families.

The social and educational environments of the students provided a range of social-relational capital. This was found, for instance, not only through their families, but through the support most of the students received from their peers. The majority of the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university came from schools and colleges within which educational progression and attainment was encouraged. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university considered themselves to mix with social circles that included other individuals of the same age pursuing the same educational route. These students commented on wanting to go to university, as that was the 'next step' in their educational path, though they also did not want to feel 'left out'. The influence of peer and reference groups within educational institutions, therefore, were found to play an influential role on the students' decisions to continue their education. This was highlighted in statements made by two students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university and who participated in the access route individual interviews.

"I would say about ninety-five percent of us fifth years went onto sixth-form at the school...it was more or less the done thing...The only people I can think of who didn't go to university were those who took a year out to go travelling or to get a job or something, earn some extra money before...the school was very encouraging, they wanted you to do as much as you could...it was my friends and the school really that encouraged me to, to go on and do greater things" (Access Route A, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

"All my friends have gone to big places to experience different life...I suppose it put a bit of pressure on you because you didn't want to be the one who was going to stay at home and not experience things so I suppose you worked hard because you wanted to go with everyone and everything" (Access Route C, B.Ed Primary, Female, <20 yrs).

The first quote highlights that the decision to continue into higher education occurred within a particular cultural capital context, there being an ethos within their environment that was pro-education. The student exemplifies this by stating that she continued into higher education, as "it was more or less the done thing". This



reinforces Woods (1983) argument that such perspectives derive from cultures, and that it is these perspectives that allow us to make sense of the world. The student's decision was 'influenced' by the culture around her, one that favoured education and a 'natural' progression from one educational institution to the next, i.e. from school to sixth form/college to university.

For mature students, however, entering higher education was not the 'next step' but involved a significant change in direction. Similar to the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university, the mature students too were influenced by their peers but in different ways. Informal education networks consisted of friends with an background of educational achievement, or work colleagues who provided them with good advice, and helped them realise their goals and ambitions. A mature student's comments highlight this point.

"Compulsory education in my experience was awful... if there was a dozen that went on to do A levels after that experience that was it...The fact the school was so bad affected my choices...So it was actually my boss...who encouraged me to come to university. Because he knew how dissatisfied I was and I just wasn't really being inspired at work...he said I'll support you, he said I'll even get you voluntary redundancy so you get some money and he did all this for me" (Access Route E, Combined Studies, Female, 35-39 yrs).

Some of the mature students indicated that they admired people with an education. Due to such a continuous predisposition to education, the mature students were to varying degrees influenced to study. Mature students, therefore, entered higher education to pursue their educational goals, but also through a conscious decision to take their lives in a new direction. This is not to say, however, that the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university were not making a significant change, but that particular social and cultural capital was evident for mature students, and articulated within 'non-traditional' pathways into higher education.

Remaining at home to study or moving away from home to study also highlighted the generally low levels of economic or financial capital available to the students. Economic or financial capital came from a number of possible sources, these being either that provided by the state or family, thus imposing no or little burden on the student themselves, or being self-funded, obtained by the student themselves either through employment, savings, or incurring debts. Most of the students acknowledged that when they entered higher education their parents would be able to emotionally



support them but not financially support them. Whilst it has been argued that students who enter higher education possess financial power (Reid, 1998) this study contradicts that view. Consequently, as Woods (1984) argues, “parents do not have equal resources to bear on the situation, and again, these differences tend to follow class division” (p.47). The lack of financial power amongst the students and the high proportion who had remained at home to study or had moved away from home to study but had to incur debts and/or work part-time, possibly reflects the social class and thus financial backgrounds of the students.

All the students thus had made conscious decisions to enter higher education and generally were aware of the financial sacrifices that this decision would entail. The lack of finances amongst the students resulted in choices being made such as remaining to study at home, working part-time, and living within limited means. The students that worked part-time to subsidise their education recognised the need to work alongside the additional pressures this added whilst studying. For many students, employment was yet another area that they had to ‘juggle’ in order to manage their lives whilst studying.

Paterson’s (1995) assertion of higher education being socially remote to students from working class backgrounds was evident amongst all such students who expressed this affiliation. It was evident amongst students from all age groups that parental lack of educational experience and lack of knowledge about the education system had an impact on the degree of support parents were able to provide the students with. The degree of ‘remoteness’ was found most significantly in the students’ image and expectations of being, or unable to be, what they perceived as a ‘real’ student. Perhaps surprisingly, the concept of being a ‘real’ student was raised by many of the mature students, who commented on what being a ‘real’ student involved.

The mature students defined a ‘real’ student as a ‘traditionally’ aged student (i.e. aged twenty years or below on entry to the university), who had moved away from home and besides studying, experienced the social life attached to studying within higher education and independence for the first time. This concept of a ‘real’ student was also raised by some of the students aged twenty years or below on entry to the



university who identified with the definition of a 'real' student and who had, prior to entering higher education, an image of university life and found the image to match the reality. Their focus had been, to varying degrees, to live the 'student life' for three or four years, to experience living away from home, and to become independent. For the researcher, this suggested that the students below 20 years of age had sufficient if not all the necessary social and cultural capital to pursue this goal, of being a 'real' student. Many of such students were not concerned to any significant degree prior to entering higher education that they would not be able to fit into this role. Indeed, students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university lived in halls of residence so that they could meet other students in the same position as themselves. Their intention to make friends was clear and direct, thus enabling them to become what the students themselves recognised and defined as a 'real' student.

There were three significant areas that the students indicated as concerns upon entering university. The areas were those of being prepared for the academic expectations and realities of studying within higher education; the expectations of guidance as opposed to self-management and self-organisation; and thirdly, preparedness for being a 'student' and the issues that are attached to that identity.

In this study the majority of the students did not feel 'prepared' for the academic aspects of university life. The mature students thought this as they had been away from education for significant periods of time and expected the work to be much harder. The students aged twenty years or below on entry to the university faced difficulties due to a lack of guidance and an expectation of self-management. Many of the students had either attended a sixth form or college prior to university and had experienced a lot of attention and guidance from their tutors or peers. The requirement for self-management and a certain degree self-teaching that exists within higher education had not been a concept or a reality for the students within previous educational environments. Consequently the students found difficulties in having to adapt to this expectation. Thirdly, as all the students had images of what a 'real' student involved, all of the factors resulted in the students' experiences at the university as being different to their previous experiences, giving rise to perceptions and that they were not 'prepared' for higher education.



As agents, the students were found to be 'conscious' of their environments, and past and present situations. The degree of consciousness they possessed affected their choices, and the degree to which they felt their choices were 'informed choices'. The degree to which the students considered they had the necessary knowledge had a direct implication on the degree of power they had whilst making choices. The students were, therefore, within a situation that depended on the appropriate knowledge being gained in order to make an 'informed' choice, and to make a choice which they could act upon. These findings indicate, not surprisingly, that the students are 'intentional' beings, and that their choices are based on an evaluation of information available to them and the validation of internal and external needs.

Significantly, the students' possessed knowledge that was interpreted within their own set of personal and academic priorities. Each student, therefore, interpreted information in accordance to their own needs. The content of the information gained may have been interpreted the same by each student, but because of their situation, interpretation and meaning, the information had different implications and effects. Indeed, the cause and effect relationship between agency and structure depends on the position and social identity of the individual student, the available information, and their perceptions through which they as agents make choices. Though this study has found students to be 'conscious' and able to make choices, it is the degree to which these choices are restricted which has also been considered within this study. This was highlighted within the colonisation and coping strategies adopted by the students.

Most evidently, the students' faced opportunities and constraints at all levels of society. These opportunities and constraints were imposed by the macro, micro, and meso (institutional) structures, resulting in the students' having to make decisions and choices within a multi-layered social system, with all layers affecting their choices both positively and negatively. These layers were inter-linked, in that they all impinged on the students' position within society, their social roles and positions, their academic situations, and their aspirations. Consequently, the students found that choices were not be made in relation to one area of their lives, as all areas were, to varying degree, inter-linked. Choices within one area, therefore, had implications for the students' lives as a whole. It is the inter-relationships between the different social



positions of the students that resulted in the adoption of colonisation activities and coping strategies.

Colonisation strategies were adopted by students who recognised, to varying degrees, the extent to which they were able to 'work the system'. This was highlighted within areas such as obtaining and using resources (e.g. library books, computers). Many students discussed the restrictions a relative lack of university resources placed on their ability to study and learn. One mature student highlighted how by 'working the system' and thus coping with circumstances and adopting colonisation strategies, she could reduce or remove any constraints that were imposed.

"I don't very often have a problem...obviously they could do with a lot more books, when you've got a class of twenty and there's only one copy and it's a set text and it costs twenty-five quid it does make a lot more sense to have it in the library than to expect people to buy it...I tend to get it very, very quick, out the lecture, straight in the library, my name down on everything and then people tend to know that I've got the books and they come and borrow them off me and then I get them back. I know it sounds awful but that's is the way to work the system...I mean obviously when everyone's dissertations due in you can't find a computer, again it's a question of being canny, if you're down here at eight thirty there's no-one on the computers so you learn to sort of work around it...it's a constraint which they should sort out but then you learn to work around it so it just depends how adaptable you are really" (Access Route H, Combined Studies, Female, 25-29 yrs).

This was the only area in which students' highlighted their ability to 'work the system' to their own advantage. In most cases, students had to adopt coping strategies and make decisions that would result in the least unfavourable option being adopted.

Coping strategies were adopted by the students in situations where the different layers of their lives, though inter-linked, presented contrasting demands on their time and available resources. This led to students making compromised choices and attempting to manage to the best of their capabilities their own individual circumstance. Students had to prioritise and base decisions on what was most important to them at that particular time. Students, for example, compromised in areas such as choosing modules. Factors such as which day the module was taught influenced students' choices as choosing particular modules on particular days enabled other days to be free for employment commitments. Students also tended to choose modules that were taught on sites that were closest to their homes in order to reduce the time spent travelling.



The explanation put forward by Blaxter et al (1997) summarises these findings.

“The strategies that they adopt are many and varied, but three basic responses may be recognised: giving up other activities in order to engage in education; giving up education; or somehow managing to combine education with other life roles and coping with the resultant pressures”.

(p.144)

This quote and associated realities highlights the different ways put forward by Berger and Luckmann (1991) on how individuals (i.e. students) make decisions based on the 'here and now' and their position in it. Students have to make choices within their own realities. Their perceptions of their own realities impose 'restrictions' on choices, as students seek to balance all parts of their own reality (social and educational responsibilities) whilst making a decision. A quote from Woods (1984) too summarises this situation. Woods states that, “action is not simply a consequence of psychological attributes such as ‘drives’, ‘attitudes’, or ‘personalities, or determined by external social facts such as social structures or roles, but results from a continuous process of meaning attribution which is always emerging in a state of flux and subject to change” (p.16). Students’ choices, consequently, are not made freely, but within particular and constantly shifting constraints related to their own social and structural positions. This resulted in students’ having to cope with situations and adopt colonisation activities and thus make the best decision they can within the restrictions and limitations imposed upon that decision-making process.

### 12.1 Theoretical Framework

On re-examining the theoretical model at the final stages of this study, it appears that it is a fair representation of the different social processes that are inter-linked across the different levels of analysis and experience, i.e. macro, meso and micro. On first examination, the main body of the theoretical model of educational decision-making in Diagram 2.1 is presented in a box. This may have had the unfortunate effect of suggesting that though the processes are inter-related, the processes situated inside the higher education institution box are separate from those occurring prior to the higher education ‘box’, such as those portrayed at the top of the model. The bifurcation of the model in this way was not intentional, but instead was an attempt to represent a visual separation of the students’ experiences prior to university compared to those experiences whilst at university.



It has been found through this study that the model is an abstract presentation of a set of social and educational processes that are inter-linked across levels. At the same time, the remaking of the processes by the individuals and social groups concerned means that the experiential basis of the model is in a state of flux in relation to degrees of relevance at different times through the students' educational and life pathways. The students' social backgrounds and positions, with the associated access to and experiences of, the different sorts of capital (cultural, social-relational etc.) therefore, have been found to have been significant during their schooling experiences.

Many of the students were the first ones from their families entering higher education, and thus undergoing some degree of separation from their situation of origin. As a result, it is clear also that they had to actively construct their experiences of higher education, albeit in ways initially informed by the cultural capital and concepts residing in their parent cultures. This part of the model was found to be the most significant thread, influencing the students at all levels throughout their educational life histories.

The students who participated in the study had benefited from varying degrees of social capital and cultural capital that was part of their pre-university experiences. The students' perceptions were in turn influenced by their experiences and expectations of higher education. Once in higher education, the students were found to gain information from a range of guidance sources (official, family, peers, friends etc), though this area raised concerns in relation to the lack of guidance that some of the students received.

The theoretical framework recognises too the relationship and often dependency of the students' educational and personal lives on each other. The model represents a decision-making process that incorporates the students' having to balance both their educational positions and their personal positions. An awareness of this necessity to balance or weigh competing demands was articulated through what we have here called coping and colonisation strategies. The model recognises, therefore, the affect students' personal lives have on their choices whilst studying in higher education. The model thus recognises and represents social processes that are inter-linked at



macro (social structural class based), meso (institutionally based), and micro (personal context based) levels. Further research is required, however, to continue the analysis.

## **12.2 Limitations of Research Process**

After discussing the findings of the study, it is important to understand the limitations imposed by the research process. There were three main areas of limitations that may affect the findings of the study, being; sample selection; change of research focus; restrictions on time.

The samples for the three stages of research were primarily 'opportunistic' and 'voluntary' selections as the students had to volunteer their own time. The researcher could not make any students participate in the research and thus had to rely on the students' agreeing to participate when approached in lectures or attending times and dates that had been arranged in order to collect the data. Only a few of the students did not arrive ( $n=2$ ) to participate in the case study interviews resulting in the researcher having to organise other interviews with other students. The majority of the students involved, however, arrived when arranged and were reliable and dedicated to participating in the research. This self-selection process, however, may have resulted in those students who had firm views on their higher educational experiences volunteering because they wanted to express their views and opinions. It is possible that such students may not be fully representative of the student population at the university. This may have resulted in bias as a result of sample selection.

Secondly, across period of time of the research process, the interests of the researcher changed slightly resulting in some information not being 'necessary' or the exact information needed for the future of the project being missed or downplayed in earlier data collection processes. The questions provided on the questionnaire survey (9.1-9.5 & 11.1-12.3), for instance, were found to be of no significance or lacking clarity to enable relevant analysis and implications being considered in later stages. Though these questions seemed important initially, their utility declined as the study progressed. This resulted in some data being obtained but not used within the final analysis and discussion. At the same time, other data, such as that of social class, could have been more effectively collected. Because the study used self-



determination, with no guidance, the low response rates and range of responses meant that the utility of the data was not as great as it could have been. This was rectified to some extent later in the focus groups and interviews, but not in a manner sufficient to overcome totally the initial deficiencies.

Thirdly, there were delays on the research process that resulted in the study being carried out over a longer period than anticipated. During the data collection period, it was difficult to gain access to students on numerous occasions mainly due to the courses structures as the majority of the students' had to attend teaching placements or were situated at various times on other sites of the university. This delayed the research process, and resulted in times and schedules being changed, and as a result prolonged the timetable and duration of the study.

The researcher, however, was able to not only gain an insight into a particular area of personal and academic interest, but also to develop and adopt particular methodologies and theories that created an increased awareness of the subject. The researcher was able to experience the benefits of triangulation, defined here as being the adoption of more than one research method generating both quantitative and qualitative data. The researcher felt, therefore, that not only had knowledge been gained, but skills as a researcher had been developed and practised. Though the researcher encountered difficulties with certain aspects of the research process, these difficulties provided an insight into the possible constraints and limitations the research process can impose, alongside the beneficial gains of examining a particular area and topic of interest in depth.

An understanding of key concepts has occurred, with 'cultural' and 'social-relational' capital have been significant within many areas throughout this study. All of the students had to varying degrees 'cultural' capital and/or 'social-relational' capital that had benefited them in entering into higher education and also, and more significantly to this research, their time within higher education. The degree to which the students were aware of this is debatable as they recognised the importance of particular influential factors on their educational paths, but also emphasised a degree of free will and independent thought used within the choices they made.



### **12.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this research have highlighted the degree to which cultural capital and relational-social capital influence individuals' educational pathways, and help define individuals' future options and choices available.

This research could be further extended in three areas. Firstly, the empirical study could be replicated and extended by examining the theoretical model process within other educational institutions and within other subject areas. Different institutions of higher education may contain students with different experiences to this study, extended further by the experiences of students studying different subjects. By adopting the theoretical model used in this research to a much wider and diverse student population, it may be possible to produce a much deeper interpretation of the student population as a whole, and how cultural capital and relational-social capital influence different students onto a variety of educational pathways.

Secondly, the key concepts of the research could be developed and refined in future research, adapting the research methods to deal with the key concepts of cultural capital and relational-social capital more directly and specifically. The third way in which future research could be developed, is by refining the theoretical model used in this research, in relation to the inter-relations and social processes that it portrays. Within social theory, the inter-relationships between the macro-meso-micro are examined to a limited extent, with theories focusing more so on either the macro or the micro debate. By examining the inter-relationship between macro-meso-micro will not only provide future development of this research and the devised theoretical model, but also develop social theory and understanding of social processes.



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# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUESTIONNAIRE

## Introduction

The higher education system is developing in two ways. Firstly, in terms of the courses it provides and secondly through the widening of access routes into higher education which enables a more diverse range of individuals from different backgrounds to study. We would like to examine the structure and provision of courses alongside the experiences of students to ensure that all students are receiving a high standard of education and that each individual student's needs are being met. This will enable the University of Wolverhampton to provide equality of opportunity and enhance students learning experiences and their experiences within the higher education system.

ALL OF THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE SHALL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

### INSTRUCTIONS:

Indicate your choice with a horizontal line in the appropriate box e.g. ☐ DO NOT use crosses or ticks.

## SECTION 1: PERSONAL DETAILS

1

Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐

2.

What is your ethnic origin? Please mark the appropriate box.

White (European) ☐

Bangladeshi ☐

White (Other) ☐

Pakistani ☐

Black African ☐

Indian ☐

Black Caribbean ☐

Chinese ☐

Black (Other) ☐

Asian (Other) ☐

Other: ☐

Please specify:

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

1☐

2☐

3☐

4☐

5☐

6☐

7☐

8☐

9☐

0☐

3.

What was your age at the beginning of your course? Please mark the appropriate box.

20 or under ☐

21-24 ☐

25-29 ☐

30-34 ☐

35-39 ☐

40-44 ☐

45-49 ☐

50 or above ☐

4.1

Are you a registered disabled person? Yes ☐ No ☐

4.2

Do you have a disability for which you are not registered? Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 5.1

4.3

If yes what is your disability? Please specify:

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1☐

2☐

3☐

4☐

5☐

6☐

7☐

8☐

9☐

0☐

5.1

Are you a student from overseas? Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 6

5.2

If yes, where is your permanent residence? Please mark the appropriate box.

Africa ☐

Asia ☐

America ☐

Europe ☐

North America ☐

New Zealand ☐

6.

What is the title of the award you are currently studying? Please mark the appropriate box.

B.Ed Secondary ☐

B.Ed (Hons) Primary ☐

BA (Hons) Secondary ☐

An Award Within the Modular Degree and Diploma Scheme ☐



7. Please list your **optional** modules and mark the appropriate box to specify whether each is a specialist, major, minor, joint or triple subject.

Core subjects do not need to be listed.

| Module Titles | Specialist               | Major                    | Minor                    | Joint                    | Triple                   |                          |
|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 _____       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 _____       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 _____       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 _____       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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1☐ 2☐ 3☐ 4☐ 5☐ 6☐ 7☐ 8☐ 9☐ 0☐

8. What is your marital status? Please mark the appropriate box.

Single ☐ Separated ☐ Married ☐

Widowed ☐ Divorced ☐ Cohabiting ☐

9.1 Were you previously in paid employment before entering higher education (excluding vacation work)?  
Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 9.4

9.2 If yes, how many years were you in paid employment? Please include any periods of unemployment during which you were seeking work. Please mark the appropriate box.

0-2☐ 3-5☐ 6-10☐ 11-15☐ 16-20☐ 21-25☐ 26+☐

9.3 What was your main occupation?

Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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1☐ 2☐ 3☐ 4☐ 5☐ 6☐ 7☐ 8☐ 9☐ 0☐

9.4 Have you been in any other paid employment besides your main occupation?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 10

9.5 If yes please list below any other jobs and whether they were full-time or part-time, permanent, temporary, or vacation work. Please mark the appropriate box(es).

| Occupation Title | Full Time                | Part Time                | Permanent                | Temporary                | Vacation                 |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. _____         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. _____         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. _____         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. _____         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. _____         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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1☐ 2☐ 3☐ 4☐ 5☐ 6☐ 7☐ 8☐ 9☐ 0☐

10. Please mark the appropriate box(es) which represent your previous main occupation , your partner's , mother's , and father's occupations (where applicable) under the appropriate headings.

|  | Self                     | Partner                  | Mother                   | Father                   |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| A: Higher managerial, administrative or professional worker                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| B: Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional worker                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| C1: Supervisory or clerical and junior or managerial, administrative professional worker | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| C2: Skilled manual workers   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| D: Semi-skilled and unskilled workers  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| E: State pensioner or lowest grade worker  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| F: House-person  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| G: Student   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



11.1 Do you have any other work experience besides paid employment?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 12.1

11.2 If yes please specify below any unpaid work experience, work placements, or any voluntary work you have undertaken before entering higher education.  
Please mark the appropriate box(es).

| Work Title | Experience               | Placement                | Voluntary                |
|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. _____   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. _____   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. _____   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY 10 ☐ 20 ☐ 30 ☐  
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 0 ☐

12.1 Were you unemployed for any period of time before entering higher education?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 13.1

12.2 If yes, how long were you unemployed. Please mark the appropriate box.

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 0-11 months <input type="checkbox"/>      | between 1-2years <input type="checkbox"/> | between 2-3years <input type="checkbox"/> |
| between 3-4years <input type="checkbox"/> | between 4-5years <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 years or above <input type="checkbox"/> |

12.3 Were you unemployed immediately before beginning your course? Yes ☐ No ☐

13.1 Do you have any children who are dependent on you?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 14

13.2 If yes, which age groups do these children belong to? Please mark the appropriate box(es).

5 or under ☐ 6-10 ☐ 11-15 ☐ 16-18 ☐ 19 or above ☐

14. Do you have any dependent relatives (other than children) whom you care for?

Yes ☐ No ☐

15.1 Do you consider yourself to belong to a particular social class? If no go to 16  
Please mark the appropriate box.

Yes, the same as my parents ☐

Yes, in relation to my previous occupational status ☐

No, I consider myself to be no particular social class while I am a student as social class is related to employment ☐

No, I do not consider myself to belong to a particular social class ☐

15.2 If yes, which social class do you consider yourself to belong to?

Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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## SECTION 2: PREVIOUS EDUCATION AND ACCESS ROUTE

16. Which type of school did you attend during the ages 11-16 years?  
Please mark the appropriate box(es).

|  |                                  |  |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Private <input type="checkbox"/>       | State <input type="checkbox"/>   | Grant-maintained <input type="checkbox"/>        |
| Comprehensive <input type="checkbox"/> | Grammar <input type="checkbox"/> | City Technology College <input type="checkbox"/> |

17. Which type of education institution did you attend after the age of 16 years before attending this University? Please mark the appropriate box(es).

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Sixth form at School <input type="checkbox"/>          | Sixth form at College <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| College of Further Education <input type="checkbox"/>  | Open University course <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Institute of Higher Education <input type="checkbox"/> | University <input type="checkbox"/>             |

Other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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0289



18. Which of the following access routes best represents your path into higher education?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

- Route A: I entered university directly after leaving school.

☐
- Route B: I left school at 16 to go into further education and then entered directly into university.

☐
- Route C: I went into further education from the sixth-form and then to university.

☐
- Route D: I am a mature student who has entered university through an access course.

☐
- Route E: I am a mature student who has entered university with qualifications other than an access course.

☐
- Route F: I entered university with vocational qualifications.

☐
- Route G: I am a mature student returning to university having previously left another course/university.

☐
- Route H: I am a mature student with previously gained entrance qualifications entering university after a period of time away from education.

☐
- Route I: I am under twenty years of age and followed Route A but was involved with non-educational activities before beginning university (e.g. VSO or travel)

☐
- Other: Please specify:

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☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5☐6☐7☐8☐9

19. Did you take any resit examinations to qualify for your place at university?  
Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 21

20. If yes how many resit examinations did you take? Please mark the appropriate box.

☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5☐6☐7+

SECTION 3: REASONS FOR ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION

21. For what reasons did you decide to enter higher education? You may have more than one reason. Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|   | Most important reason    | Important reason         | No influence             | Unimportant reason       | Most unimportant reason  |  |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| I want to train for a specific career.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| A degree would improve my chances of entering a good job. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| I was unsatisfied in my former employment.                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| I was unemployed before entering higher education.        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| I want to study a subject I enjoy.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| I want to enjoy the social life at university.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| I want the challenge of doing a degree.                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| It seemed the next step in my education.                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |

Other: Please specify:

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☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5☐6☐7☐8☐9

22. Who directly influenced your decision to enter higher education? You may have more than one answer. Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|                                 | Most encouraging         | Encouraging              | No influence             | Discouraging             | Most discouraging        |  |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Partner                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Parents                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Sisters / Brothers              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Other family members            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Friends                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Teachers at school/college      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Careers advisers                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Previous employer               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| Advice centre                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |
| No-one, it was solely my choice | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |  |

Other: Please specify:

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

☐1☐2☐3☐4☐5☐6☐7☐8☐9



23.1 What age in years did you decide that you wanted to go into higher education? Please mark the appropriate box.

Under 5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 11-15 ☐ 16-20 ☐ 21-25 ☐ 26+ ☐

23.2 What age in years did you decide that you wanted to go to the University of Wolverhampton? Please mark the appropriate box.

Under 5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 11-15 ☐ 16-20 ☐ 21-25 ☐ 26+ ☐

24. Do you know what you want to do during the year after you have completed your course? You may have more than one answer. Please mark the appropriate box(es).

Enter full-time paid employment ☐

Enter part-time paid employment ☐

Continue my education to gain a professional qualification ☐

Continue my education to gain a postgraduate qualification ☐

I want to travel ☐

I want to do voluntary work ☐

I am not sure what I want to do ☐

Other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐

25.1 Do you know which career you want to enter after completing your course?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 26.1

25.2 If yes which career?

Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 0 ☐

## SECTION 4: REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

26.1 Was the University of Wolverhampton your first choice when applying for a place at University?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes go to 27.1

26.2 If no, how did you gain your place at this University? Please mark the appropriate box.

It was my second choice ☐

It was my third choice ☐

Through the clearing system ☐

By compact system ☐

27.1 Did you apply to any other Universities or Institutions of higher education besides the University of Wolverhampton?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 28

27.2 If yes, please list any other Universities of Institutions of higher education where you applied to study at and the outcomes of each application under the appropriate headings. Please mark the appropriate box(es).

Name of Institution

|         | Offer                    | No offer                 | Accept                   | Decline                  |
|---------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY 10 ☐  
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 0 ☐



28. Did you attend an open day at the University of Wolverhampton? Yes ☐ No ☐

29. Why did you choose to study at the University of Wolverhampton? You may have more than one reason. Please mark the appropriate box(es).

|                                     | Very important           | Important                | Unsure                   | Unimportant              | Very unimportant         |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Friendly atmosphere                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Liked the campus                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Quality accommodation               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Well stocked library                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cheap accommodation                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Multi-ethnic student population     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Campus location                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Liked the course                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good recreational activities        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Well situated for good night-life   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good reputation                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Child care facilities               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Study a specialist degree           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Close to family / friends           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Promotes equal opportunities        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good study / IT facilities          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Personal recommendation             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Detailed and informative prospectus | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Compact system                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

30. Was distance an influential factor on your decision to study at the University of Wolverhampton? Please mark the appropriate box.

|  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| Yes I wanted to remain living at home  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes I wanted to stay near to home  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes I wanted to move away from home but not too far away                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes I wanted to move far away from home  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The location of the University had no influence on my decision to attend this University | <input type="checkbox"/> |

31. For what reasons did you decide to either stay at home, near to home, or move away from home? You may have more than one reason. Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|                                     | Very important           | Important                | Unsure                   | Unimportant              | Very unimportant         |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Financially better off              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Support from family                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stay with friends                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stay in a familiar environment/area | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Wanted to be independent            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Wanted to meet new people           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Move out of my home town            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Move out of my parents home         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Region had no impact on my decision | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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SECTION 5: STUDYING ON A MODULAR COURSE

32. Do you agree with the following statements in relation to modularity and learning procedures. Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|             |  | Strongly agree           | Agree                    | Uncertain                | Disagree                 | Strongly disagree        |
|-------------|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <div></div> | 1. Modularity enables me to develop new skills.                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 2. I am responsible for my own learning and programme of study.                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 3. The modular system provides flexibility to study a variety of courses.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 4. I manage my time and plan my workload well to suit myself.                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 5. A modular degree is more appropriate to my needs than a single-subject degree     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 6. Each module clearly defines what it provides in terms of knowledge                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 7. Each module clearly defines what it provides in terms of skills                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 8. The skills I am gaining will make me a more 'employable graduate'                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 9. The information I gain from each module is forgotten once the course is completed | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 10. I can avoid modules in which I feel unconfident                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 11. The modules I have chosen have no or little relation to each other               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 12. Once a module is complete I have little time to reflect upon what I have learnt  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 13. Modules begin and end at the same level preventing any real progression          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 14. I have made the wrong choices in some of the modules I have chosen               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 15. I have no control in a modular system  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 16. I receive no support from the academic support                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 17. Class sizes are too big  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 18. Class sizes are too small  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 19. I feel isolated in a large institution   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 20. Teaching lacks one-to-one contact  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

33. In relation to assessment procedures and methods do you agree with the following statements. Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|             |   | Strongly agree           | Agree                    | Uncertain                | Disagree                 | Strongly disagree        |
|-------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <div></div> | 1. Assessments monitor my progress and improve attainment                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 2. Assessments vary over modules thus providing a larger learning experience                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 3. Assessments make courses more interesting  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 4. Assessments make learning a more pleasurable experience                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 5. Assessments require wide reading resulting in more knowledge gained                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 6. Assessments make the system 'fair'   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 7. I prefer continual assessments to end of year examinations                               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 8. Assessments provide me with a continual awareness of my standard of work                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 9. Assessments produce a constant and heavy workload  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 10. Continual assessments are more demanding than end of year exams                         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <div></div> | 11. Assessments often occur half-way or at the end of each module thus all at the same time | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

34. Have you completed a teaching / work practice as part of your course?

Yes

☐

No

☐

If no go to 36



35.

If yes what do you feel you have gained in terms of knowledge and skills?  
Please explain your answer as fully as possible.

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10

20

30

40

50

60

70

80

90

00

36.

Do you feel that you are gaining and developing the following skills on your course?  
Please mark the appropriate box for each.

|   | Very often               | Often                    | Unsure                   | Not Very Often           | Never                    |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Communicating well with other students/staff   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Developing self-management by planning your time and workload                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Gathering information well   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Using information well   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Using the Information Technology facilities (computers, CD-Rom etc)                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Working independently via study  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Working independently via voluntary work   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Working as part of a group / team via study  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Working as part of a group / team via voluntary work   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Experiencing working within organisations other than the university                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Developing your achievements and abilities whilst at the university                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Developing your personal and academic confidence by assessing your work and accepting criticism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses and accommodating these appropriately              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Gaining credit-based learning experiences within the university                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

37.1

Are you a currently developing a Record of Achievement?

Yes

No

If yes go to 37.3

37.2

If no, do you intend to develop a Record of Achievement?

Yes

No

37.3

Do you agree that developing a Record of Achievement is a helpful process in evaluating your progress on your course?

Yes

No

38.

How many hours per week do you attend lectures and seminars?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

0-3

4-6

7-9

10-12

13-15

16-18

19-21

39.

How many hours per week do you study independently? Please mark the appropriate box.

0-4

5-9

10-14

15-19

20-24

25-29

30+

40.

When do you study independently. You may have more than one answer.  
Please mark the appropriate box(es).

Weekdays

Week-ends

Evenings

No set time

0289

8



SECTION 6: FINANCE AND ACCOMMODATION

41.1 How much grant do you receive each term from your Local Education Authority?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

£0 £1-200 £201-300 £301-400 £401-500 £501-600  
£601-700 £701-800 £801-900 £901-1,000 £1,001+

41.2 Do your parents provide financial support during your studies?

Yes No If no go to 42

41.3 If yes how much do they provide each term? Please mark the appropriate box.

£0 £1-200 £201-300 £301-400 £401-500 £501-600  
£601-700 £701-800 £801-900 £901-1,000 £1,001+

42. Do you receive funding from any of the following sources?  
Please mark the appropriate box(es).

I am a self-funded student I have financial support from my partner  
I receive sponsorship I work part-time  
I receive support from the Hardship fund I have a bank overdraft  
I have one credit card

Other: Please specify:

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43. Which of the following are your main financial out-goings each week?  
Please mark the appropriate box(es).

Family/Children Rent on accommodation  
Food and toiletries Bills  
Books Equipment  
Hobbies and Interests Travelling (petrol / bus)  
Social life

Other: Please specify:

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44.1 Have you taken out a student loan whilst at this university?

Yes No If no go to 45.1

44.2 If yes please mark the appropriate box(es) for which academic year each loan was taken out and the value of each loan.

Year 1 Year 2 Year 3  
£1-250 £1-250 £1-250  
£251-500 £251-500 £251-500  
£501-750 £501-750 £501-750  
£751-1000 £751-1000 £751-1000  
£1001-1250 £1001-1250 £1001-1250  
£1251-1500 £1251-1500 £1251-1500  
£1501+ £1501+ £1501+

45.1 Did you pay for or contribute to your course fees?

Yes No If no go to 46.1

45.2 If yes how much did you pay? Please mark the appropriate box.

£1-500 £501-1000 £1001-1500 £1501-2000  
£2001-2500 £2501-3000 £3001-3500 £3501+



46.1 If you have a part-time job to support your studies how many hours per week do you work?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

1-5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 11-15 ☐ 16-20 ☐ 21-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐ 31+ ☐

46.2 Do you feel that part-time work has a negative affect on your studies?

Yes ☐ No ☐

47. How much debt do you predict to owe once your studies are completed?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

£0 ☐ £1-1,000 ☐ £1,001-2,000 ☐ £2,001-3,000 ☐  
£3,001-4,000 ☐ £4,001-5,000 ☐ £5,001-6,000 ☐ £6,001-7,000 ☐  
£7,001-8,000 ☐ £8,001-9,000 ☐ £9,001-10,000 ☐ £10,000+ ☐

48.1 What type of accommodation do you live in during term time?  
Please mark the appropriate box.

Compton Halls of Residence ☐  
Walsall Halls of Residence ☐  
Telford Halls of Residence ☐  
Dudley Halls of Residence ☐  
Wolverhampton Halls of Residence ☐  
Shared student house / flat (rented) ☐  
Own house / flat ☐  
Parents home ☐  
Other family members home ☐  
Lodgings ☐

Other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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48.2 If you do not live in any of the halls of residence, in which area do you live?

Walsall ☐ Wolverhampton ☐ Telford ☐  
Birmingham ☐ Dudley ☐ Sandwell ☐  
Lichfield ☐ Staffordshire ☐ Shropshire ☐

Other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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48.3 How would you grade the standard of your accommodation during term time?  
Please tick the appropriate box.

Very high ☐ High ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐

49.1 Do you have the use of a private car during term time to travel to the other University campuses?

Yes ☐ No ☐

49.2 Do you use the bus service provided by the University to travel to any of the other University campuses?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 49.4

49.3 If yes, how many days a week do you use the bus service provided by the University?

1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ Go to 50.1



[illegible]

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY    1 ☐    2 ☐    3 ☐    4 ☐    5 ☐    6 ☐    7 ☐    8 ☐    9 ☐

Yes ☐ No ☐ If no go to 51

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**Telephone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

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## **Basis of Questions for Questionnaire**

### **Section 1: Personal details**

Question: Who is entering higher education?

Questions related to sex; ethnic origin; age; marital status; social class; dependent children / relatives.

### **Section 2: Previous Education and Access Route**

Question: How are students entering higher education?

What educational experiences are students bringing with them to higher education?

Questions related to type of school attended; post-school education; educational achievements; access route into HE; career aspirations.

### **Section 3: Reasons for entering higher education**

Questions: Why do students decide to enter higher education?

Questions related to reasons for entering HE; influences on decision to enter HE; age of decision; post-university expectations; career aspirations.

### **Section 4: Reasons for choosing the University of Wolverhampton**

Question: Why do students choose to study at the University of Wolverhampton?

Questions related to the selection process; how students gained their place; open day; reasons for choosing University of Wolverhampton; influence of distance on choice.

### **Section 5: Studying on a Modular Course**

Questions: On what basis do students select their modules?

How do students 'use' the system to their advantage and to what extent do they have to 'fit into' a highly structured system?

Do students make 'informed' choices?



Questions related to the positive and negative aspects of modularity and assessment procedures; teaching / work practices; skills and knowledge; records of achievement; hours of study (independent and lectures).

### **Section 6: Finance, Accommodation and Recreation**

Questions:     What are the non-academic influential factors that impinge on students' decision-making processes, such as family commitments, financial obligations, and multi-site provision?

Questions related to grants; parental contribution; family contribution; sources of funding; debt; financial out-goings; student loans; part-time work; type of accommodation; area of residence; shuttle service, recreational activities. Once the questionnaire was devised, it had to be piloted to check for possible inconsistencies and errors.



**Focus Group Questions**

1. How well did your previous education prepare you for studying in higher education?
  - ‘Preparedness’- educational experiences and opportunities.
  - ‘Preparedness’ - experiences and opportunities of student life.
2. What advice / information did you receive / use before choosing this University and your course?
  - Family, friends, other students, staff at university, self.
  - Open days, prospectus.
  - Information services / counselling services.
  - Influence of career choice on which course chosen.
3. What was your image of university life before you came to this University?
  - Images of courses and learning experiences.
  - Images of student life and non-academic experiences.
4. What do you feel about your chosen course of study?
  - Learning styles, assessments procedures, records of achievement.
  - Work experiences, teaching practices.
  - Module choices, modular courses.
  - Independent learning / study.
  - Time management, workload levels.
  - Library use, IT facilities.
5. What information do you need to know to manage your academic life at this University?
  - On-going information, subject / module / award guides.
  - Source that provided information.
  - Preferred method of information provision (verbal / written / electronic).



6. Which factors outside of the University affect your studies?
  - Financial support / constraints, debt levels, employment.
  - Standards of student accommodation, remaining to live at home.
  - Personal responsibilities (e.g. dependants).
  - Issues of multi-site university, employment preparation.
  - Social membership / activities.
  
7. If you were the manager of this group discussion, what question would you like to ask and discuss about your experiences at this University?
  - Open ended allowing anything important to each individual student to be commented on.



Focus Group and Interview Form

SEAT No: \_\_\_\_\_ (to be completed by interviewer)

Please complete this form as fully as possible by ticking the appropriate boxes.

COURSE:            B.Ed Secondary            ☐                            B.Ed Primary            ☐  
                         BA Secondary            ☐                            Combined Studies            ☐

SEX:                      Female ☐                      Male ☐

AGE:                      18-20   ☐                      21-24   ☐                      25-29   ☐  
(Entered HE)            30-34   ☐                      35-39   ☐                      40-44   ☐  
                                 45-49   ☐                      50+   ☐

ETHNIC GROUP:            White (European)            ☐                            Bangladeshi            ☐  
                                 White (Other)            ☐                            Pakistani            ☐  
                                 Black African            ☐                            Indian            ☐  
                                 Black Caribbean            ☐                            Chinese            ☐  
                                 Black (Other)            ☐                            Asian (Other)            ☐  
Other: ☐ (Please specify).....

MARITAL STATUS:            Single            ☐                            Separated            ☐  
                                 Married            ☐                            Cohabiting            ☐  
                                 Widowed            ☐                            Divorced            ☐

DISABLED:            Yes            ☐                            No            ☐  
If yes, which disability? .....



Please tick which of the following access routes you followed into higher education.

- |                          |         |  |
|--------------------------|---------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route A | I entered university directly after leaving school.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route B | I left school at 16 to go into further education and then entered directly into university.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route C | I went into further education from the sixth-form and then entered directly into university.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route D | I am a mature student who has entered university through an access course.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route E | I am a mature student who has entered university with qualifications other than an access course.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route F | I entered university with vocational qualifications.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route G | I am a mature student returning to university having previously left another course / university.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route H | I am a mature student with previously gained entrance qualifications entering university after a period of time away from education.                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Route I | I am under twenty years of age and followed Route A but was involved with non-educational activities before beginning university (e.g. VSO or travel). |

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS FORM**



**Seating Plan: B.Ed Secondary**

B.Ed Secondary  
Female  
35-39 years  
Black Caribbean  
Widowed  
No disability  
Access Route D

B.Ed Secondary  
Female  
35-39 years  
White (European)  
Married  
No disability  
Access Route E

B.Ed Secondary  
Male  
30-34 years  
White (European)  
Married  
No disability  
Access Route E

**INTERVIEWER**



**Seating Plan: B.Ed. Primary**

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route B

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route B

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route I

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Cohabiting  
No Disability  
Route B

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route B

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route C

B.Ed Primary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No Disability  
Route A

**INTERVIEWER**



**BA Secondary: Seating Plan**

BA Secondary  
Female  
35-39 years  
White (European)  
Divorced  
No disability  
Access Route E

BA Secondary  
Female  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No disability  
Access Route A

BA Secondary  
Male  
<20 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No disability  
Route B

**INTERVIEWER**



**Combined Studies in Education: Seating Plan**

Combined Studies  
Male  
35-39 years  
Asian (Other)  
Married  
No disability  
Access Route G

Combined Studies  
Female  
30-34 years  
Black Caribbean  
Single  
No disability  
Access Route E

Combined Studies  
Female  
50+ years  
White (Other)  
Divorced  
No disability  
Access Route H

Combined Studies  
Female  
50+ years  
White (European)  
Divorced  
No disability  
Access Route D

Combined Studies  
Male  
35-39 years  
White (European)  
Single  
No disability  
Access Route D

Combined Studies  
Female  
40-44 years  
White (European)  
Married  
No disability  
Access Route E

**INTERVIEWER**



## Individual Interview Questions

### 1. Experiences of Higher Education

#### 1. What was your image and expectations of university?

What information did you use when you chose this university?

What other factors, if any, influenced your decision to study at this university?

Why did you choose to study your course that you are doing at this university?

What information did you use to help you make that choice?

What other factors, if any, influenced that choice?

Where and with whom have you lived with whilst studying here at this university?

What factors, if any, influenced your choice of accommodation?

#### 2. Which financial options have you used to support yourself whilst studying here at this university?

How have you managed financially whilst studying?

Has your financial position had any implications on your studies or any other part of your life whilst being in HE?

How and why did you choose the modules you have taken?

Have there been any constraints on your module choices during your studies?

If yes, what have been the implications of these constraints?

If no, how would you describe the process of module choice?

#### 3. What were your experiences of your teaching practices?

Have there been any constraints or problems related to your teaching practice experience?

#### 4. How would you describe the library and IT facilities at the university?

Have the facilities here placed constraints on or have they enhanced your learning process?

How have you experienced and managed your workload?

Have there been any constraints, if any, on your workload and your time?

If yes, what are the implications of these constraints?

#### 5. What kind of information do you feel you need whilst here at the university?

How do you obtain this information?

Has information provision placed constraints on or enhanced your learning process at the university?

If yes, what are the implications of this? Has it affected your studies?



6. Do you participate in any social activities at the university?

If yes, which activities?

How have you incorporated your social activities into your university life?

If no, have there been any constraints on your involvement in social activities at the university?

7. Has the fact that the university is a multi-site institution placed constraints on your studies in any way?

8. Have you experienced any differences in your education here at the university in each of the academic years?

If yes, what are those differences?

If yes, what implications has this had on your choices and / or experiences?

**2. Attitudes Towards Education**

1. What were / are your family's attitude towards education, particularly higher education (parents, siblings)?

2. What are / were your friends attitudes towards education, particularly higher education?

3. What is / was your partners attitude towards education, particularly higher education?

4. What are your children's attitudes towards education, particularly higher education?

5. What were / are your educational ambitions in relation to your career ambitions?

**3. Post-school Experiences**

1. Did you have any time away from education after leaving school?  
If yes, what did you do and for how long?

2. Why did you choose this route instead of continuing your education?  
If no, why did you choose to continue your education straight from school?

3. What type of educational institution after school did you go to (i.e. sixth-form etc)?  
What courses did you study and achieve?

4. Were there any other influential factors which influenced your decision to continue / return to education?

5. Have you had any work experiences?  
If yes, when, for how long and what type of work?



#### **4. Schooling Experiences (Secondary)**

1. What type of secondary school did you go to (private, state, etc)?  
What qualifications did you gain?
2. How influential were your friends on your decision to continue / leave education?
3. Did you receive any careers guidance at school?  
If yes or no, were there any implications?
4. Were there any other influences or constraints on your choice to continue / leave school?

#### **5. Socio-economic Status**

1. What are your parents' educational backgrounds?
2. What are / were your parents occupations?
3. How would you describe your family's income level while you were growing up?
4. What was the view of your family on education, particularly higher education while you were growing up?  
Did their attitudes have any impact on you?
5. Have you any dependent children / family members?  
If yes, has this placed constraints on your learning process in any way?

#### **6. Self-evaluation**

1. What were your personal expectations and ambitions when younger?  
What are your personal expectations and ambitions now?
2. Have there been any significant influences on the educational choices you have made through your life?
3. What have been your goals whilst at university?  
What have been the major factors affecting you achieving those goals?
4. Do you feel that your educational experiences and choices particularly in HE have affected or changed you in any way?